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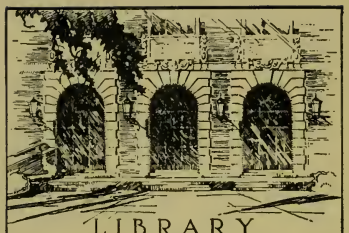

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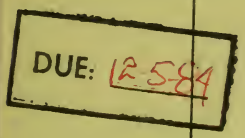

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CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "BIRDS OF PREY,"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER

WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW

1868

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Book the Fourth.

THE FIRST ACT OF MR. SHELDON'S DRAMA.

CHAPTER I.

TAKEN BY STORM.

Two days after her interview with Gustave Lenoble, Miss Paget received a brief note from her father, summoning her again to Omega-street.

"*He* has not gone back to Normandy," wrote the Captain. "My child, he positively worships the ground you walk upon. Ah, my love, *it is something to have a father!* I need scarcely tell you that his first idea of your excellence was inspired by those glowing descriptions of your goodness, your beauty, your heroism, which I favoured him with, *en passant*, during our conversations at Côtenoir, where the happy accident of a business transaction first introduced me to him. The interests of my only child have ever been near and dear to me; and where a duller man would have perceived only a wealthy stranger, my

paternal instincts recognised at a glance the predestined husband of my daughter. It needed my wide experience of life—and, as I venture to believe, my subtle knowledge of the human heart—to understand that a man who had lived for five-and-thirty years buried alive in a French province—a charming place, my love, and for your refined taste replete with interest—never seeing a mortal except his immediate neighbours, would be the man of men to fall in love with the first attractive young woman he met among strangers. Come to me this afternoon without fail, and come early.

"Yours,

"H. N. C. P."

Diana obeyed this summons submissively, but still troubled by that strange sense of bewilderment which had affected her since her stormy interview with Captain Paget. She was not quite certain of herself. The old dreams—the sweet, foolish, girlish fancies—were not yet put away altogether from her mind; but she knew that they were foolish, and she was half-inclined to believe

that there had been some wisdom in her father's scorn.

"What do I want more?" she asked herself. "He is good and brave and true, and he loves me. If I were a princess, my marriage would be negotiated for me by other people, and I should have reason to consider myself very happy if the man whom the state selected for my husband should prove as good a man as Gustave Lenoble. And he loves me; me, who have never before had power over a man's heart!"

She walked across Hyde Park on this occasion, as on the last; and her thoughts, though always confused—mere rags and scraps of thought—were not all unpleasant. There was a smile, half shy, half tender, on her face as she went into the little sitting-room where Gustave was waiting for her. She had seen his hat and overcoat in the passage, and knew that he was there waiting for her. To this poor desolate soul there was something sweet in the idea of being waited for.

As she stood but a little within the doorway, blushing, almost trembling with the sense of her

changed position, her lover came across the room and took her in his arms. The strong brave arms held her to his breast; and in that one embrace he took her to his heart, and made her his own for ever.

In every story of life-long affection there is one moment in which the bond is sealed. Diana looked up at the frank, tender face, and felt that she had found her conqueror. Master, friend, protector, husband, adoring and devoted lover, gallant and fearless champion—he was all; and she divined his power and his worth as she glanced shyly upward, ashamed to be so lightly won.

"M. Lenoble," she faltered, trying to withdraw herself from the strong encircling arm that held her, as if by right.

"Gustave, now and for ever, my Diane! There shall be no more Monsieur Lenoble. And in a few weeks it shall be 'my husband.' Your father has given me to you. He tells me to laugh at your refusals, your scruples; to assail you like your Shakespeare's Petruchio assails his Katherine—with audacious insolence that will not be

denied. And I shall take his advice. Look up into my face, dear angel, and defy me to take his advice."

Happily the dear angel looked only downwards. But M. Lenoble was resolved to have an agreeable response.

"See, then, thou canst not defy me!" he cried, in the only language he spoke; and the "*tu*" for the first time sounded very tender, very sweet. "Thou canst not tell me thou art angry with me. And the other—the imbecile!—he is gone for ever, is he not? Ah, say yes!"

"Yes, he is gone," said Diana, almost in a whisper.

"Is he quite gone? The door of thine heart locked against him, his luggage thrown out of the window?"

"He is gone," she murmured softly. "He could not hold his place against you—you are so strong, so brave; and he was only a shadow. Yes; he is gone."

She said this with a little sigh of relief. It was in all sincerity that she answered her suitor's

question. She felt that a crisis had come in her life—the first page of a new volume; and the old, sad, tear-blotted book might be cast away.

"Dear angel, wilt thou ever learn to love me?" asked Gustave, in a half-whisper, bending down his bearded face till his lips almost touched her cheek.

"It is impossible not to love you," she answered softly. And indeed it seemed to her as if this chivalrous Gaul was a creature to command the love of women, the fear of men; an Achilles *en frac;* a Bayard without his coat of mail; Don Quixote, in his youth, generous, brave, compassionate, tender, and with a brain not as yet distempered by the reading of silly romances.

Captain Paget emerged from his den as the little love-scene ended. He affected a gentlemanly unconsciousness of the poetry involved in the situation; was pleasantly anxious about the tea-tray, the candles, and minor details of life; and thus afforded the lovers ample time in which to recover their composure. The Frenchman was in nowise discomposed; he was only abnormally gay,

with a little air of triumph that was not unpleasing. Diana was pale; but there was an unwonted light in her eyes, and she had by no means the appearance of a victim newly offered on the sacrificial altar of filial duty. In sober truth, Miss Paget was happier to-night than she had been for a long time. At three-and-twenty she was girl enough to rejoice in the knowledge that she was truly loved, and woman enough to value the sense of peace involved in the security of a prosperous future.

If she was grateful to her lover,—and the affection he had inspired in her heart had grown out of gratitude,—it was no mercenary consideration as to his income or position that made her grateful. She thanked him for his love—that treasure which she had never expected to possess; she thanked him because he had taken her by the hand, and led her out of the ranks of lonely dependent womanhood, and seated her upon a throne, on the steps whereof he was content to kneel. Whether the throne were a rushen chair in some rustic cottage, or a gilded *fauteuil*

in a palace, she cared very little. It was the subject's devotion that was new and sweet to her.

She went to Charlotte's room that night, when Mr. Sheldon's small household was at rest; as she had gone on Christmas-eve to renounce her lover and to bless her rival. This time it was a new confession she went to make, and a confession that involved some shame. There is nothing so hard to confess as inconstancy; and every woman is not so philosophic as Rahel Varnhagen, who declared that to be constant was not always to love the same person, but always to love someone.

Miss Paget seated herself at Charlotte's feet, as she had done on that previous occasion. The weather was still cold enough to make a fire very pleasant, though it was more than two months since the Christmas bells had rung out upon the frosty air. Diana sat on a low hassock, playing with the tassels of her friend's dressing-gown, anxious to make her confession, and sorely at a loss for words in which to shape so humiliating an avowal.

"Charlotte," she began abruptly at last, "have

you any idea when you and Valentine are to be married?"

Miss Halliday gave a little cry of surprise.

"Why, of course not, Di! How can you ask such a question? Our marriage is what uncle George calls a remote contingency. We are not to be married for ages—not until Valentine has obtained a secure position in literature, and an income that seems almost impossible. That was the special condition upon which Mr. Sheldon—papa—gave his consent to our engagement. Of course it was very proper and prudent of him to think of these things; and as he has been very kind and liberal-minded in his conduct to me throughout, I should be a most ungrateful person if I refused to be guided by his advice."

"And I suppose that means that your engagement is to be a long one?"

"The longest of long engagements. And what can be happier than a long engagement? One gets to know and understand the man one is to marry so thoroughly. I think I know every turn of thought in Valentine's mind; every taste, every

fancy; and I feel myself every day growing to think more and more like him. I read the books he reads, so as to be able to talk to him, you know; but I am not so clever as you, Di, and Valentine's favourite authors do sometimes seem rather dry to me. But I struggle on, you know; and the harder I find the struggle, the more I admire my dear love's cleverness. Think of him, Di—three different articles in three different magazines last month! The paper on Apollodorus, in the *Cheapside*, you know; and that story in the *Charing Cross*—'How I lost my Gingham Umbrella, and gained the acquaintance of Mr. Gozzleton.' *So* funny! And the exhaustive treatise on the Sources of Light, in the *Scientific Saturday*. And think of the fuss they make about Homer, a blind old person who wrote a long rigmarole of a poem about battles, and wrote it so badly that to this day no one knows whether it's one complete poem, or a lot of odds-and-ends in the way of poetry, put together by some person whose crack-jaw name I wouldn't attempt to pronounce, for worlds. When I think of what Valentine accom-

plishes in comparison to Homer, and the little notice the reviewers take of him, except to make him low-spirited by telling him that he is shallow and frivolous, I begin to think that literature must be going to the dogs."

And here Charlotte became meditative, absorbed in the contemplation of Mr. Hawkehurst's genius. Diana had begun the conversation very artfully, intending to proceed by a gentle transition from Charlotte's love-affairs to her own; but the conversation was drifting away from the subject into a discussion upon literature, and the brilliant young essayist whose first adventurous flights seemed grand as the soaring of Theban eagle to this tender and admiring watcher of his skyward progress.

"Lotta," said Miss Paget, after a pause, "should you be very sorry if I were to leave you before your marriage?"

"Leave me before my marriage, Diana! Is it not arranged that you are to live with mamma, and be a daughter to her, when I am gone? And you will come and stay with Valentine and me at

our cottage; and you will advise me about my housekeeping, and teach me how to be a sensible, useful, economical wife, as well as a devoted one. Leave us, Di! What have I done, or mamma, or Mr. Sheldon, or anybody, that you should talk of anything so dreadful?"

"What have you done, dear girl, dear friend, dear sister? Everything to win my undying love and gratitude. You have changed me from a hard, disappointed, bitter-minded woman—envious, at times, even of you—into your loving and devoted friend. You have changed me from a miserable creature into a contented and hopeful one. You have taught me to forget that my childhood and youth were one long night of wretchedness and degradation. You have taught me to forgive the father who suffered my life to be what it was, and made no one poor effort to lift me out of the slough of despond to which he had sunk. I can say no more, Charlotte. There are things that cannot be told by words."

"And you want to leave me!" said Charlotte, in accents half-wondering, half-reproachful.

"My father wants me to leave you, Lotta; and someone else—someone whom you must know and like before I can be sure I like him myself."

"Him!" cried Charlotte, with a faint shriek of surprise. "Diana, WHAT are you going to tell me?"

"A secret, Lotta; something which my father has forbidden me to tell anyone, but which I will not hide from you. My poor father has found a kind friend—a friend who is almost as good to him as you are to me. How merciful Heaven is in raising up friends for outcasts! And I have seen a good deal of this gentleman who is so kind to papa, and the result is that—chiefly for papa's sake, and because I know that he is generous and brave and true, I mean papa's friend, M. Lenoble—I have consented to be his wife."

"Diana!" cried Charlotte, with a sternness of manner that was alarming in so gentle a creature, "it shall never be!"

"What, dear?"

"The sacrifice! No, dear, no! I understand it all. For your cruel, mercenary, heartless, designing father's sake, you are going to marry a man whom you can't love. You are going to offer up your poor, bruised, desolate heart on the altar of duty. Ah, dear, you can't think I forget what you told me only two short months ago—though I seem selfish and frivolous, and am always talking about *him*, and parading my happiness, as it must seem to you, reckless of the wounds so newly healed in your noble unselfish heart. But I do not altogether forget, Diana, and such a sacrifice as this I will not allow. I know you have resigned him to me—I know you have thrust him from your heart, as you told me that night. But the hollow aching void that is left in your lonely heart shall be sacred, Di. No stranger's image shall pollute it. You shall not sacrifice your own peace to your father's selfishness. No, dear, no! With mamma and me you will always have a home. You need stoop to no cruel barter such as this marriage."

And hereupon Miss Halliday wept over and

caressed her friend, as the confidante of Agamemnon's daughter may have wept over and caressed that devoted young princess after the divination of Calchas had become common talk in the royal household.

"But if I think it my duty to accept M. Lenoble's offer, Lotta?" urged Miss Paget with some embarrassment of manner. "M. Lenoble is as rich as he is generous, and my marriage with him will secure a happy home for my father. The foolish dreams I told you about on Christmas-eve had faded from my mind before I dared to speak of them. I could only confess my folly when I knew that I was learning to be wise. Pray do not think that I am sordid or mercenary. It is not because M. Lenoble is rich that I am inclined to marry him, it is because—"

"Because you want to throw yourself away for the advantage of your selfish, heartless father," interjected Charlotte. "He has neglected you all your life, and now wants to profit by the sacrifice of your happiness. Be firm, Di, darling; your Charlotte will stand by you, and find a home

for you always, come what may. Who is this M. Lenoble? Some horrible ugly old creature, I daresay."

Miss Paget smiled and blushed. The vision of Gustave's frank handsome face arose before her very vividly as Charlotte said this.

"No, dear," she replied. "M. Lenoble is not an old man—five-and-thirty at most."

"Five-and-thirty!" repeated Charlotte with a wry face; "you don't call that *young?* And what is he like?"

"Well, dear, I think he is the sort of man whom most people would call handsome. I'm sure *you* would like him, Lotta. He is so candid, so animated, so full of strength and courage. The sort of man to whom one would naturally look in any emergency or danger; the sort of man in whose company fear would be impossible."

"Diana," cried Charlotte suddenly, "you are in love with him!"

"Lotta!"

"Yes, dear, you are in love with him," re-

peated Miss Halliday, embracing her friend with effusion; "yes, over head and ears in love with him. And you are ashamed to confess the truth to me; and you are half-ashamed to confess it even to yourself—as if you could deceive an old stager like me?" cried Charlotte laughing. "Why, you dear inconstant thing, while I have felt myself the guiltiest and most selfish creature in the world for robbing you of Valentine, you have been quietly transferring your affections to this M. Gustave Lenoble—who is very rich, and brave, and true, and generous, and what most people would call handsome! Bless you, a thousand times, my darling! You have made me so happy."

"Indeed, Lotta?"

"Yes, dear. The thought that there was a blank in your life made a dark cloud in mine. I know I have been very selfish, very thoughtless, but I could never have been quite free from a sense of self-reproach. But now there is nothing for me but happiness. O, darling, I so long to see your M. Lenoble!"

"You shall see him, dear."

"And in the mean time tell me what he is like."

Miss Halliday insisted upon a full, true, and particular account of M. Lenoble's personal appearance. Diana gave it, but not without some sense of embarrassment. She could not bring herself to be enthusiastic about Gustave Lenoble, though in her heart there was a warmth of feeling that surprised her.

"What a hypocrite you are, Di!" exclaimed Charlotte presently. "I know you love this good Frenchman almost as dearly as I love Valentine, and that the thought of his affection makes you happy; and yet you speak of him in little measured sentences, and you won't be enthusiastic even about his good looks."

"It is difficult to pass from dreams to realities, Lotta. I have lived so long among dreams, that the waking world seems strange to me."

"That is only a poetical way of saying that you are ashamed of having changed your mind. I will tell M. Lenoble what a lukewarm creature you are, and how unworthy of his love!"

"You shall tell him what you please. But remember, dear, my engagement must not be spoken about yet awhile, not even to your mamma. Papa makes a strong point of this, and I have promised to obey, though I am quite in the dark as to his reasons."

Miss Halliday submitted to anything her friend wished; only entreating that she might be introduced to M. Lenoble. Diana promised her this privilege; but it speedily transpired that Diana's promise was not all that was wanted on this occasion.

For some time past, in fact from the very commencement of Charlotte's engagement, Mr. Sheldon had shown himself punctilious to an exceeding degree with regard to his stepdaughter. The places to which she went, and the people with whom she consorted, appeared to be matters of supreme importance in his mind. When speaking of these things he gave those about him to understand that his ideas had been the same from the time of Charlotte's leaving school; but Diana knew that this was not true. Mr. Sheldon's theories had

been much less strict, and Mr. Sheldon's practice had been much more careless, prior to Miss Halliday's engagement.

No stately principal of a school for young ladies could have been more particular as to the movements of her charges—more apprehensive of wolf-in-sheep's-clothing in the shape of singing or drawing-master—than Mr. Sheldon seemed to be in these latter days. Even those pleasant walks in Kensington Gardens, which had been one of the regular occupations of the day, were now forbidden. Mr. Sheldon did not like that his daughter should walk in public with no better protector than Diana Paget.

"There is something disreputable in two girls marching about those gardens together, according to my ideas," said this ultra-refined stockbroker, one morning at the family breakfast-table. "I don't like to see my stepdaughter do anything I should forbid my own daughter to do. And if I had a daughter, I should most decidedly forbid all lonely rambles in Kensington Gardens. You see, Lotta, two girls as attractive as you and Miss

Paget, can't be too particular where you go, and what you do. When you want air and exercise, you can get both in the garden; and when you want change of scene, and a peep at the fashions, you can drive out with Mrs. Sheldon."

To this deprivation Charlotte submitted, somewhat unwillingly, but with no sign of open rebellion. She thought her stepfather foolish and unreasonable; but she always bore in mind the fact that he had been kind and disinterested in the matter of her engagement, and she was content to prove her gratitude by any little sacrifice of this kind. Was not her lover permitted to spend his Sundays in her society, and to call on her, at his discretion, during the week? And what were walks in Kensington Gardens compared with the delight of his dear presence! It is true that she had sometimes been favoured with Mr. Hawkehurst's society in the course of her airing; but she knew that he sacrificed his hours of work or study for the chance of half an hour in her society; and she felt that there might be gain to him in her loss of liberty.

She told him, when next they met, that the morning walks were forbidden; and, so jealous a passion is love, that Mr. Hawkehurst was nowise sorry to find that his pearl was strictly watched and carefully guarded.

"Well, it seems very particular of Mr. Sheldon, of course," he said; "but, upon my word, I think he's right. Such a girl as you oughtn't to go about with no better protection than Diana can give you. Fellows will stare so at a pretty girl, you know; and I can't bear to think my pearl should be stared at by impertinent strangers."

Mr. Hawkehurst did not, however, find the strict notions of his lady-love's stepfather quite so agreeable when he wanted to take his "pearl" to the winter exhibitions of pictures. He was told that Miss Halliday could go nowhere, except accompanied by her mamma; and as Georgy did not care about pictures, and found herself unequal to the fatigue of attending the winter exhibitions, he was obliged to forego the delight of seeing them with Lotta on his arm. He pronounced Mr. Sheldon on this occasion to be a narrow-minded

idiot; but withdrew the remark in a contrite spirit when Charlotte reminded him of that gentleman's generosity.

"Yes, dear, he has certainly been very kind and very disinterested—more disinterested than even you think; but, somehow, I can't make him out."

It was very well for Miss Halliday that she had submitted to this novel restriction with so good a grace, inasmuch as Mr. Sheldon had prepared himself for active opposition. He had given orders to his wife, and further orders to Mrs. Woolper, to the effect that his stepdaughter should not be permitted to go out of doors, except in his own or her mother's company.

"She is a very good girl, you see, Nancy," he said to the old housekeeper, "but she's young, and she's giddy; and of course I can't take upon myself to answer for Miss Paget, who may or may not be a good girl. She comes of a very bad stock, however; and I am bound to remember that. Some people think that you can't give a girl too much liberty. My ideas lean the other

way. I think you can't take too much care of a very pretty girl whom you are bound by duty to protect."

All this sounded very noble and very conscientious. It sounded thus even to Mrs. Woolper, who in her intercourse with Philip Sheldon could never quite divest herself of one appalling memory. That memory was the death of Tom Halliday, and the horrible thoughts and fears that had for a time possessed her mind in relation to that death. The shadow of that old ghastly terror sometimes came between her and Mr. Sheldon, even now, though she had long ago assured herself that the terror had been alike groundless and unreasonable.

"Didn't I see my own nephew carried off by a fever twice as sudden as the fever that carried off poor Mr. Halliday?" she said to herself; "and am I to think horrid things of him as I nursed, a baby, because a cup of greasy beef-tea turned my stomach?"

Convinced by such reasoning as this that she had done her master a grievous wrong, and grate-

ful for the timely shelter afforded in her old age, Mrs. Woolper felt that she could not do too much in her benefactor's service. She had already shown herself a clever managing housekeeper; had reformed abuses, and introduced a new system of care and economy below-stairs, to the utter bewilderment of poor Georgy, for whom the responsibilities of the Gothic Villa had been an overwhelming burden. Georgy was not particularly grateful to the energetic old Yorkshire woman who had taken this burden off her hands, but she was submissive.

"I never felt myself much in the house, my dear," she said to Lotta; "but I am sure since Ann Woolper has been here I have felt myself a cipher."

Mrs. Woolper, naturally sharp and observant, was not slow to perceive that Mr. Sheldon was abnormally anxious about his stepdaughter. She ascribed this anxiety to a suspicious nature, an inherent distrust of other people on the part of her master, and in some measure to his ignorance of womankind.

"He seems to think that she'd run away and get married on the sly, at a word from that young man; but he doesn't know what a dear innocent soul she is, and how sorry she'd be to displease anyone that's kind to her. I don't know anything about Miss Paget. She's more stand-offish than our own Miss, though she is little better than a genteel kind of servant; but she seems fair-spoken enough. As to our Miss, bless her dear heart, she wants no watching, I'll lay. But I daresay those City folks, with their stocks going up and going down, and always bringing about the ruin of somebody or other, go which way they will, get their poor heads so muddled with figures that they can't believe there's such a thing as honesty in the world."

This was the gist of Mrs. Woolper's evening musing in the snug little housekeeper's room at the Lawn. It was a very comfortable little room, and held sacred to Mrs. Woolper; the three young females, and the boy in buttons, who formed Mr. Sheldon's in-door establishment, preferring the

license of the kitchen to the strict etiquette of the housekeeper's room.

This apartment, as well as every other room in the stockbroker's house, bore the stamp of prosperity. A comfortable easy-chair reposed the limbs of Mrs. Woolper; a bright little fire burned in a bright little grate, and its ruddy light was reflected in a bright little fender. Prints of the goody class adorned the walls; and a small round table, with a somewhat gaudy cover, supported Mrs. Woolper's work-box and family Bible, both of which she made it a point of honour to carry about with her, and to keep religiously, through good fortune and through evil fortune; neither of which, however, afforded her much employment. She felt herself to be much nearer grace with the family Bible by her side than she would have been without it; she felt, indeed, that the maintenance and due exhibition of the family Bible was in itself a kind of religion. But that she should peruse its pages was not in the bond. Her eyes were old and weak — sharp enough to discover the shortcomings of Mr. Sheldon's

young maid-servants, but too feeble even for long-primer.

As she looked round that snug little chamber of an evening, when her day's labours were ended, and her own particular Britannia-metal teapot was basking in the fender, her own special round of toast frizzling on the trivet, she was very grateful to the man to whom she owed these comforts.

"What should I be but for him?" she asked herself, with a shudder; for the vision of that darksome abode shut in by high black walls—the metropolitan workhouse—arose before her. She did not know what difficulties would have barred her entrance even to that dreary asylum; she only thought of the horrors of that sanctuary, and she blessed her master for the benevolence that had accepted the service of her failing hands.

This was the servant on whom Philip Sheldon relied. He saw that she was grateful, and that she was ready to serve him with an almost slavish devotion. He knew that she had suspected him in the past, and he saw that she had outlived her suspicion.

"There is a statute of limitations for these things as well as for debt," he said to himself. "A man can live down anything, if he knows what he is about."

CHAPTER II.

FIRM AS A ROCK.

After that midnight interview between the two girls in Miss Halliday's bedroom, life went very smoothly at the Gothic Villa for two or three days, during which the impulsive Charlotte, being forbidden to talk openly of the change in her friend's position, was fain to give vent to her feelings by furtive embraces and hand-squeezings, sly nods and meaning becks, and mischievous twinkling of her arch gray eyes.

She talked of Valentine more than ever now, feeling herself at liberty to sing what pæans she pleased in praise of her hero, now that her friend had also a fitting subject for pæans.

"And now it's your turn to talk of M. Lenoble, dear," she would say naïvely, when she had entertained Diana with the minute details of

her last conversation with her lover, or a lively sketch of the delights of that ideal cottage which she loved to furnish and unfurnish in accordance with the new fancy of the hour.

Diana was pleased to listen to her girlish talk: to hang and rehang the ideal draperies, to fill and refill the ideal bookcase, to plan and replan the arrangements of that ideal existence which was to be all joy and love and harmony; but when her turn came, and she was asked to be rapturous about her own lover, she could say nothing: that which she felt was too deep for words. The thought of her lover was strange to her; the fact of his love was mysterious and wonderful. She could not talk of him with the customary frivolous school-girl talk; and love for him had so newly taken root in her heart, that there were as yet no blossoms to be gathered from that magical plant.

"Don't ask me to talk of him, Lotta dear," she said. "I am not yet sure that I love him: I only feel that it is sweet to be loved by him.

I think Providence must have sent him to me in pity for my desolation."

This was almost the same fancy that had occurred to Susan Meynell five-and-thirty years before this time, when Gustave the first had rescued her from the suicide's unrepentable sin.

That chivalrous turn of mind which was hereditary in the race of Lenoble predisposed these men to pity loneliness and beauty, weakness and sorrow. This pity for helplessness may have been indeed only an element of their exceeding strength. Was not the rescue of weaklings and women an unfailing attribute in the mighty men of old? Who so prompt as Hercules to fly to the rescue of Hesione? who so swift as Perseus to save Andromeda? And what sea-monster more terrible than loneliness and poverty?

In a few days there came another letter from Captain Paget, containing a fresh summons to Omega-street.

"Lenoble positively returns to Normandy to-morrow," he wrote, "to see his girls, and, no doubt, break the news of his approaching mar-

riage. He much wants to see you, and, as I have forbidden his calling on you at the Lawn, can only meet you here. He is to drink tea with me at the usual time to-morrow evening, and I shall expect to see you early in the afternoon."

This offered an opportunity for that introduction to which Miss Halliday looked forward with so much interest.

"If Mr. Sheldon and your mamma will let you come with me this afternoon, dear, I shall be very pleased to take you," said Diana; and she felt that she would appear less in the character of a lamb led to the slaughter if she could go to meet her betrothed accompanied by Charlotte.

But in this matter both the young ladies were doomed to disappointment. Mr. Sheldon showed himself a social Draco in all things relating to his stepdaughter. Being forbidden to reveal the existence of Gustave Lenoble, Charlotte could only urge a frivolous desire to accompany her friend in a pilgrimage dictated by filial duty. To the practical mind of Philip Sheldon this desire ap-

peared altogether absurd and unreasonable, and he did not hesitate to express himself to that effect in a *tête-à-tête* with his stepdaughter.

"What good on earth can you do by going to see a gouty old man, who has his own daughter to dance attendance upon him?" asked Mr. Sheldon. "Really, Charlotte, I am surprised to hear such a proposition from a girl of your good sense. Miss Paget is your companion, not your visitor. It is her duty to indulge your whims, but it is not your place to give way to hers."

"But this is a whim of mine, papa; I should really like to spend the afternoon at Chelsea. It would be a change, you know."

Mr. Sheldon looked at his stepdaughter with a sharp and searching gaze, a gaze in which there was suspicion as well as curiosity.

"It is a very discreditable whim for a young lady in your position," he said sternly; "and I beg that such a proposition may not be made to me again."

This was decisive. Charlotte submitted, and Diana went alone to Omega-street. She found

Gustave waiting for her. He proposed a walk, and Captain Paget was enthusiastic upon the subject of fresh air, and the benefits arising therefrom. So the lovers went out in the bleak winter afternoon, and wandered in the dreary Pimlico region as far as St. James's-park—Gustave delighted to have Diana's hand upon his arm, and Diana almost bewildered by a sense of happiness, which seemed unreal by reason of its very novelty.

Gustave was all enthusiasm, full of plans for the future. He would have had the marriage take place immediately, if such a thing had been possible; but Diana showed him that it would not be possible. Her first duty was to the only friends she had ever known. Gustave argued the point resolutely for nearly an hour, during which time they made their way to the very gates of St. James's-park, but Diana was more resolute still.

"What a tyrannical wife I shall have by and by!" said Gustave. "I think you care for these Sheldons more than for me, Diane."

"These Sheldons have been so good to me in the past."

"And I mean to be so good to you in the future," answered Gustave. "You shall be the happiest wife in Normandy, if a foolish, doting husband's devotion can make you happy."

"What have I done to deserve so much devotion?" Diana murmured wonderingly.

"What have you done? Nothing, less than nothing. You will not even run the hazard of offending your family of Sheldon in order to make me happy. But Fate has said, 'At the feet of that girl with the dark eyes and pale proud face shall poor Lenoble of Côtenoir put down his heart.' Do you know what I said to myself when I saw you first in the little parlour yonder? Ah, no! How should you guess? 'She is there,' said I; 'behold her! It is thy destiny, Lenoble, on which thou gazest!' And thou, love, wert calm and voiceless as Fate. Quiet as the goddess of marble before which the pagans offered their sacrifices, across whose cold knees they laid their rich garments. I put my treasures in your lap, my love;

my heart, my hopes,—all the treasures I had to offer."

This was all very sweet, but there was a sting even mingled with that sweetness. Diana told herself that love like this should only be offered on the purest shrine; and when she remembered the many stains upon her father's honour, it seemed to her that a part of the shame must needs cleave to her.

"Gustave," she said presently, after an absent meditative mood, from which her lover had vainly tried to beguile her, "does it not seem to you that there is something foolish in this talk of love and confidence between you and me; and that all your promises have been a little too lightly made? What do you know of me? You see me sitting in my father's room, and because my eyes happen to please you, or for some reason as foolish as that, you ask me to be your wife. I might have been one of the worst of women."

"You might have been?—yes, dear, but you are not. And if you had been, Gustave Lenoble

would not have flung his heart into your lap, even if your eyes had been sweeter than they are. We impulsive people are people of quick perceptions, and know what we are doing better than our reflective friends imagine. I did not need to be an hour in your company, dear love, in order to know that you are noble and true. There are tones in the voice, there are expressions of the face, that tell these things better than words can tell them; for, you see, words can lie, while tones and looks are apt to be true. Yes, my angel, I knew you from that first night. My heart leapt across all conventional barriers, and found its way straight to yours."

"I can see that you think much better of me than I deserve; but even supposing you not to be deceived as to myself, I fear you are much deceived as to my surroundings."

"I know that your father is poor, and that the burden of his poverty weighs heavily on you. That is enough for me to know."

"No, M. Lenoble; it is not enough for you to know. If I am to be your wife, I will not

enter your family as an impostor. I told you the truth about myself the other day when you questioned me, and I am bound to tell you the truth about my father."

And then she told him, in the plainest, frankest language, the story of her father's life. She inflicted no unnecessary shame on Captain Paget; she made no complaint of her neglected childhood and joyless youth; but she told Gustave that her father had been an adventurer, keeping doubtful company, and earning his bread by doubtful means.

"I hope and believe that if a peaceful home could be secured for his declining years, he would live the rest of his life like a gentleman and a Christian; and that, the bitter struggle for existence being ended, he would be sorry for the past. I doubt if the sense of shame ever deserted him when he was living that wretched wandering life, leaving debts and difficulties behind him everywhere—always harassed and hunted by creditors, who had good cause to be angry. Yes, Gustave, I do believe that if it should please

Providence to give my father a peaceful home at last, he will be thankful for God's mercy, and will repent the sins of his life. And now I have told you the kind of heritage I can bring my husband."

"My dear love, I will accept the heritage, for the sake of her who brings it. I never meant to be less than a son to your father; and if he is not the best of fathers, as regards the past, we will try to make him a decent kind of father, as regards the future. I have long understood that Captain Paget is something—ever so little—of an adventurer. It was the pursuit of fortune that brought him to me; and without knowing it, he brought me my fortune in the shape of his daughter."

Diana blushed as she remembered that Captain Paget had not been so innocent of any design in this matter as the Frenchman imagined.

"And you will receive even papa for my sake?" asked Diana.

"With all my heart."

"Ah, you are indeed a generous lover!"

"A lover who is not generous is—bah! there is nothing in creation so mean as the wretch whom love does not render generous. When one sees the woman whom fate intends for one's wife, is one to stop to inquire the character of her father, her mother, her sister, her cousin?—for there is no stopping when you begin that. A man who loves makes no inquiries. If he finds his jewel in the gutter, he picks it out of the mud and carries it away in his bosom, too proud of his treasure to remember where he found it; always provided that the jewel is no counterfeit, but the real gem, fit for a king's crown. And my diamond is of the purest water. By and by we will try to drain the gutter—that is to say, we will try to pay those small debts of which you speak, to lodging-housekeepers, and tradesmen who have trusted your father."

"You would pay papa's debts!" cried Diana in amazement.

"But why not? All these little debts, the thought of which is so bitter to you, might be discharged for two or three thousand pounds.

Your father tells me I am to be very rich by and by."

"My father tells you! Ah, then, you have allowed him to involve you in some kind of speculation!"

"He has involved me in no speculation, and in no risk that two or three hundred pounds will not cover."

"The whole business seems very mysterious, Gustave."

"Perhaps; it has to do with a secret which I am pledged to keep. I will not allow your father to lead me into any quagmire of speculation, believe me, dear one."

After this they went back to Omega-street in the winter gloaming, and Diana loved and admired this man with all her heart and mind. A new life lay before her, very bright and fair. There, where had been only the barren desert, was now a fair landscape, shining in the sunlight of hope.

"Do you think your children will ever love me, Gustave?" she asked, not without some sense

of wonder that this impulsive, light-hearted lover should be the owner of children. She fancied that a responsibility so grave as paternity must needs have impressed some stamp of solemnity upon the man who bore it.

"Ever love thee!" cried Gustave. "Child, they will adore thee! They ask only someone to love. Their hearts are gardens of flowers; and thou shalt gather the flowers. But wilt thou be happy at Côtenoir, thou? It is somewhat sad, perhaps—the grave old château with the long sombre corridors. But thou shalt choose new furniture, new garnitures at Rouen, and we will make all bright and gay, like the heart of thy affianced. Thou wilt not be dull?"

"Dull, with you and yours! I shall thank God for my happy home day and night, as I never thought to thank Him a few months ago, when I was dissatisfied, wicked, tired of my life."

"And when you thought of that other one? Ah, how he was an imbecile, that other one! But thou wilt never think of him again; it is a dream that is past," said M. Lenoble.

That self-confidence which was an attribute of his sanguine nature rendered the idea of a rival not altogether unpleasant to him. He was gratified by the idea of his own victory, and the base rival's annihilation.

"Diane, I want to show thee the home that is to be thine," he said presently. "Your Sheldon family must give thee at least a holiday, if they refuse to let thee go altogether. Thou wilt come to Normandy with thy father. He is coming for a week or two, now that his gout is better. I want to show thee Côtenoir—and Beaubocage, the place where my father was born. It will seem dreary, perhaps, to thine English eyes; but to me it is very dear."

"Nothing that is dear to you shall appear dreary to me," said Diana.

By this time they had arrived at Omega-street. Again Miss Paget made tea for her lover. Strange to say, the operation seemed to grow more agreeable with every repetition. While taking his tea from the hands of his beloved, Gustave pressed the question of Diana's visit to Normandy.

"About her Sheldon family she is adamant," he said to Captain Paget, who sipped his tea and smiled at the lovers with the air of an aristocratic patriarch. "There is to be no marriage till it pleases Mrs. Sheldon to set her free. I consent to this only as man must consent to the inevitable; but I say to her, can she not come to Normandy for a fortnight — say but one short fortnight—to see her home? She will come with you. She has but to ask a holiday of her friends, and it is done."

"Of course," exclaimed the Captain, "she shall come with me. If necessary, I myself will ask it of Sheldon.—But it will be best not to mention where you are going, Diana. There are reasons, best known to our friend Gustave and myself, which render secrecy advisable just at present. You can say Rouen. That is quite near enough to the mark to come within the limits of truth," added Horatio, with the tone of a man who had never quite outstepped those limits. "Yes, Rouen. And you will come with me."

"With us," said Gustave. "I will put off

my journey for a day or two for the sake of going with you. You have to meet Fleurus in Rouen, haven't you?"

"Yes; he is to be there on the fifth of March, and this is the last day of February. I had a letter from him this morning. All goes swimmingly."

Diana wondered what it could be which went swimmingly; but she was obliged to content herself with her lover's assurance that he had not allowed her father to involve him in any kind of speculation.

CHAPTER III.

AGAINST WIND AND TIDE.

Between Philip Sheldon and his brother there was at this time a state of feeling somewhat akin to the relations between a subjugated country and its conqueror. The vanquished is fain to accept whatever the victor is pleased to give, though discontent and impotent rage may be gnawing his entrails. George Sheldon had been a loser in that game in which the Haygarthian inheritance was the stake. He had held good cards, and had played them with considerable cleverness; but no play could prevail against his antagonist's ace of trumps. The ace of trumps was Charlotte Halliday; and as to his mode and manner of playing this card, Mr. Sheldon was for the present profoundly mysterious.

"I have known a good many inscrutable cards

in my time," the solicitor of Gray's-Inn observed to his elder brother, in the course of fraternal converse; "but I think for inscrutability you put the topper on the lot. What do you expect to get out of this Haygarth estate? Come, Phil, let us have your figures in plain English. I am to have a fifth—that's all signed and sealed. But how about your share. What agreement have you got from Miss Halliday?"

"None."

"None!"

"What would the world think of me if I extorted money, or the promise of money, from my wife's daughter? Do you think I could enforce any deed between her and me?"

"Ah, I see; you go in for respectability. And you are going to leave the settlement of your claims to your stepdaughter's generosity. You will let her marry Hawkehurst, with her hundred thousand pounds; and then you will say to those two, 'Mr. and Mrs. Hawkehurst, be so kind as to hand over my share of the plunder.' That is not *like* you, Phil."

"Perhaps you will be good enough to spare yourself the trouble of speculating about my motives. Go your way, and leave me to go mine."

"But this is a case in which I have an interest. If Charlotte marries Hawkehurst, I don't see how you are to profit, to any extent that you would care about, by the Haygarth fortune. But, on the other hand, if she should die unmarried, without a will, the money would go to your wife. O my God! Philip Sheldon, is THAT what you mean?"

The question was so sudden, the tone of horror in which it was spoken so undisguised, that Mr. Sheldon the stockbroker was for one moment thrown off his guard. His breath thickened; he tried to speak, but his dry lips could shape no word. It was only one moment that he faltered. In the next he turned upon his brother angrily, and asked what he meant.

"You've been promised *your* reward," he said; "leave me to look after mine. You'll take those papers round to Greenwood and Greenwood; they want to talk to you about them."

"Yes, I'll take the papers."

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Greenwood and Greenwood were Mr. Sheldon's own solicitors—a firm of some distinction, on whose acumen and experience the stockbroker placed implicit reliance. They were men of unblemished respectability, and to them Mr. Sheldon had confided the care of his stepdaughter's interests, always reserving the chief power in his own hands. These gentlemen thought well of the young lady's prospects, and were handling the case in that slow and stately manner which marks the handling of such cases by eminent firms of the slow-and-stately class.

Mr. Sheldon wished his brother good-day, and was about to depart, when George planted himself suddenly before the door.

"Look you here, Phil," he said, with an intensity of manner that was by no means common to him; "I want to say a few words to you, and I will say them. There was an occasion, ten years ago, on which I ought to have spoken out, and didn't. I have never ceased to regret my cowardice. Yes, by Jove! I hate myself for it; and there are times when I feel as if my share in

that wretched business was almost as bad as yours."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course not. That's your text, and you'll stick to it. But you *do* know what I mean, and you shall know what I mean, if plain words can tell you. You and I had a friend, Phil. He was a good friend to me, and I liked him as much as a man of the world can afford to like anybody. If I had been down in the world, and had asked him for a hundred pounds to give me a new start in life, I think he'd have said, 'George, here's a cheque for you.' *That's* my notion of a friend. And yet I stood by that man's deathbed, and saw him sinking, and knew what ailed him, and didn't stretch out my hand to save him."

"Be so good as to move away from that door," said Mr. Sheldon, livid to the lips with smothered fury, but able to put on a bold front nevertheless. "I didn't come here to listen to rhodomontade of this kind, or to bandy words with you. Get out of my way."

"Not till I've said my say. There shall be no

rhodomontade this time. I stood by, and saw my best friend murdered—by you. I kept my counsel for your sake, and when you had made your fortune—by his death—I asked you for a little money. You know how much you gave me, and how graciously you gave it. If you had given me twenty times the sum you gained by Tom Halliday's death, I would give it back, and twenty times as much again, to bring him back to life, and to feel that I had never aided and abetted a murderer. Yes, by God, I would! though I'm not straitlaced or over-scrupulous at the best of times. But that's past, and all the money in the Bank of England wouldn't undo what you did in Fitzgeorge-street. But if you try on any such tricks with Tom Halliday's daughter, if *that's* the scheme you've hatched for getting hold of this money, as surely as we two live, I'll let in the light upon your doings, and save the girl whose father you murdered. I will, Philip, let come what may. You can't get *me* out of the way when it suits you, you see. *I know you.* That's the best antidote against your medicines."

"If you'll be so good as to say these things on Change, I can bring an action for libel, or get you put into a madhouse. There's no good in saying them here."

Philip Sheldon, even in this crisis, was less agitated than his brother, being of a harder nature, and less subject to random impulses of good or evil. He caught his accuser by the collar of his coat, and flung him violently from the doorway. This was his last visit to Gray's-Inn.

Boldly as he had borne himself during the interview, he went to his office profoundly depressed and dispirited.

"So I am to have him against me?" he said to himself. "He can do me no real harm; but he can harass and annoy me. If he should drop any hint to Hawkehurst?—but he'll scarcely do that. Perhaps I've ridden him a little too roughly in the past. And yet if I'd been smoother, where would his demands have ended? No; concession in these cases means ruin."

He shut himself in his office, and sat down to his desk to confront his difficulties. For a long

time the bark which was freighted with Philip Sheldon's fortunes had been sailing in troubled waters. He had been an unconscious disciple of Lord Bacon, inasmuch as the boldness inculcated by that philosopher had been the distinguishing characteristic of his conduct in all the operations of life. As a speculator, his boldness had served him well. Adventures from which timid spirits shrunk appalled had brought golden harvests to this daring gamester. When some rich argosy upon the commercial ocean fired her minute-guns, and sent up signals of distress, menaced by the furious tempest, lifted high on the crest of mountainous waves, below which, black and fathomless, yawn the valleys of death,—a frail ark hovering above the ravening jaws of the all-devouring Poseidon,—Philip Sheldon was among that chosen band of desperate wreckers who dared to face the storm, and profit by the tempest and terror. From such argosies, while other men watched and waited for a gleam of sunlight on the dark horizon, Mr. Sheldon had obtained for himself goodly merchandise. The debentures of railways that were

in bad odour; Unitas-Bank shares, immediately after the discovery of gigantic embezzlements by Swillenger, the Unitas-Bank secretary; the Mole-and-Burrow railway-stock, when the Mole-and-Burrow scheme was as yet in the clouds, and the wiseacres prognosticated its failure; the shares in foreign loans, which the Rothschilds were buying *sub rosa*;—these, and such as these, had employed Mr. Sheldon's capital; and from the skilful manipulation of capital thus employed Mr. Sheldon had trebled the fortune secured by his alliance with Tom Halliday's widow.

It had been the stockbroker's fate to enter the money-market at a time when fortunes were acquired with an abnormal facility. He had made the most of his advantages, and neglected none of his opportunities. He had seized Good Fortune by the forelock, and not waited to find the harridan's bald and slippery crown turned to him in pitiless derision. He had made only one mistake —and that he made in common with many of his fellow-players in the great game of speculation always going on eastward of Temple-Bar—he

had mistaken the abnormal for the normal: he had imagined that these splendid opportunities were the natural evolvements of an endless sequence of everyday events; and when the sequence was abruptly broken, and when the last of the seven fat kine vanished off the transitory scene of life, to make way for a dismal succession of lean kine, there was no sanguine youngster newly admitted to the sacred privileges of "The House" more astounded by the change than Mr. Sheldon.

The panic came like a thief in the night, and it found Mr. Sheldon a speculator for the rise. The Melampuses and Amphiaräuses of the Stock Exchange had agreed in declaring that a man who bought into consols at 90 *must* see his capital increased; and what was true of this chief among securities was of course true of other securities. The panic came, and from 90, consols sank dismally, slowly, hopelessly, to $85\frac{1}{2}$; securities less secure sank with a rapidity corresponding with their constitutional weakness. As during the ravages of an epidemic the weaker are first to fall victims to the destroyer, so while this fever raged on Change,

the feeble enterprises, the "risky" transactions, sank at an appalling rate, some to total expiry. The man who holds a roaring lion by the tail could scarcely be worse off than the speculator in these troublous times. To let go is immediate loss, to hold on for a certain time might be redemption, could one but know the exact moment in which it would be wise to let go. But to hold on until the beast grows more and more furious, and then to let go and be eaten up alive, is what many men did in that awful crisis.

If Philip Sheldon had accepted his first loss, and been warned by the first indication that marked the turning of the tide, he would have been a considerable loser; but he would not accept his loss, and he would not be warned by that early indication. He had implicit belief in his own cleverness; and he fancied if every other bark in that tempest-tossed ocean foundered and sank, his boat might ride triumphantly across the harbour-bar, secure by virtue of his science and daring as a navigator. It was not till he had seen a small fortune melt away in the payment

of contango, that he consented to the inevitable. The mistakes of one year devoured the fruits of nine years' successful enterprise, and the Philip Sheldon of this present year was no richer than the man who had stood by Tom Halliday's bedside and waited the advent of the equal foot that knows no difference between the threshold of kingly palace or pauper refuge. Not only did he find himself as poor a man as in that hateful stage of his existence—to remember which was a dull, dead pain even to *him*—but a man infinitely more heavily burdened. He had made for himself a certain position, and the fall from that must needs be a cruel and damaging fall, the utter annihilation of all his chances in life.

The stockbroker's fitful slumbers at this time began to be haunted by the vision of a black board fixed against the wall of a place of public resort, a black board on which appeared his own name. In what strange places feverish dreams showed him this hideous square of painted deal!—Now it was on the walls of the rooms he lived in; now on the door of a church, like Luther's proposi-

tions; now at a street-corner, where should have been the name of the street; now inky-black against the fair white headstone of his own grave. Miserable dream, miserable man, for whom the scraping together of sordid dross was life's only object, and who, in losing money, lost all!

This agonising consciousness of loss and of close-impending disgrace was the wolf which this Spartan stockbroker concealed beneath his waistcoat day after day, while the dull, common, joyless course of his existence went on; and his shallow wife smiled at him from the opposite side of his hearth, more interested in a new stitch for her crochet or Berlin-wool work than by the inner life of her husband; and Charlotte and her lover contemplated existence from their own point of view, and cherished their own dreams and their own hopes, and were, in all things, as far away from the moody meditator as if they had been natives of Upper India.

The ruin which impended over the unlucky speculator was not immediate, but it was not far off; the shadow of it already wrapped him in a

twilight obscurity. His repute as a clever and a safe man had left him. He was described now as a daring man; and the wiseacres shook their heads as they talked of him.

"One of the next to go will be Sheldon," said the wiseacres; but in these days of commercial epidemic there was no saying who would be the first to go. It was the end of the world in little. One was taken, and another left. The Gazette overran its customary column, like a swollen river, and flooded a whole page of the *Times* newspaper; and men looked to the lists of names in the Wednesday and Saturday papers as to the trump of archangels sounding the destruction of the universe.

For some time the bark in which Mr. Sheldon had breasted those turbulent waters had been made of paper. This was nothing. Paper-boats were the prevailing shipping in those waters; but Captain Sheldon's bark needed refitting, and the captain feared a scarcity of paper, or, worse still, the awful edict issued from some commercial Areopagus that for him there should be no more paper.

Once before, Mr. Sheldon had found himself face to face with ruin complete and irredeemable. When all common expedients had been exhausted, and his embarrassments had become desperate, he had found a desperate expedient, and had extricated himself from those embarrassments. The time had come in which a new means of extrication must be found; as desperate as the last, if need were. As Philip Sheldon had faced the situation before, he faced it now—unshrinkingly, though with a gloomy anger against destiny. It was hard for him that such a thing should have to be repeated. If he pitied anybody, he pitied himself; and this kind of compassion is very common with this kind of character. Do not the Casket letters show us—if we may trust them to show us anything—that Mary Stuart was very sorry for herself when she found herself called upon to make an end of Darnley? In Mr. Swinburne's wonderful study in morbid anatomy there are perhaps no finer touches than those which reveal the Queen's selfish compassion for her own heartlessness.

CHAPTER IV.

DIANA ASKS FOR A HOLIDAY.

DIANA informed Mrs. Sheldon of her father's wish that she should leave Bayswater. Before doing this, she had obtained the Captain's consent to the revelation of her engagement to be married.

"I don't like to leave them in a mysterious manner, papa," she said. "I have told Charlotte a good deal already, under a promise of secrecy; but I should like to tell Mrs. Sheldon that there is a real reason for my leaving her."

"Very well, my love, since you are so amazingly squeam—honourable," interposed the Captain, remembering how much depended on his daughter's marriage, and what a very difficult person he had found her. "Yes, my dear, of course; I respect your honourable feeling; and—er—yes—you *may* tell Mrs. Sheldon—and that of

course includes Mr. Sheldon, since the lady is but an inoffensive cipher — that you are about to be married — to a French gentleman of position. You will, of course, be obliged to mention his name, and then will arise the question as to where and how you met him; and, upon my word, it's confoundedly awkward that you should insist on enlightening these people. You see, my dear girl, what I want to avoid, for the present, is any chance of collision between the Sheldons and Lenoble."

"Papa!" exclaimed Diana impatiently, "why *must* there be all this scheming?"

"O, very well, Miss Paget; tell them what you like!" cried the Captain, aggravated beyond endurance by such inherent perversity. "All I can say is, that a young woman who quarrels with her bread-and-butter is likely to come to dry bread; and very little of that, perhaps. I wash my hands of the business. Tell them what you like."

"I will not tell them more than I feel to be actually necessary, papa," the young lady replied calmly. "I do not think Mr. Sheldon will trouble

himself about M. Lenoble. He seems very much occupied by his own affairs."

"Humph! Sheldon seems harassed, anxious, does he?"

"Well, yes, papa; I have thought so for the last few months. If I may venture to judge by the expression of his face, as he sits at home in the evening, reading the paper, or staring at the fire, I am sure he has many anxieties—troubles even. Mrs. Sheldon and Charlotte do not appear to notice these things. They are accustomed to see him quiet and reserved, and they don't perceive the change in him as I do."

"O, there is a change, is there?"

"Yes, a decided change."

"Why the deuce couldn't you tell me this before!"

"Why should I tell you that Mr. Sheldon seems anxious? I should not have told you now, if you had not appeared to dread his interference in our affairs. I can't help observing these things; but I don't want to play the part of a spy."

"No, you're so infernally punct—so delicate-

minded, my love," said the Captain, pulling himself up suddenly, for the second time. "Forgive me if I was impatient just now. You look at these things from a higher point of view than that of a battered old man of the world like me. But if you should see anything remarkable in Mr. Sheldon's conduct on another occasion, my love, I should be obliged if you would be more communicative. He and I have been allied in business, you see, and it is important for me to know these things."

"I have not seen anything remarkable in Mr. Sheldon's conduct, papa; I have only seen him thoughtful, and dispirited. And I suppose anxieties are common to every man of business."

Georgy received Miss Paget's announcement with mingled lamentations and congratulations.

"I am sure I am heartily glad for your sake, Diana," she said; "but what we shall do without you, I don't know. Who is to see to the drawing-room being dusted every morning, when you are gone? I'm sure I tremble for the glass shades.

Don't imagine I'm not pleased to think you should settle in life advantageously, my love. I'm not so selfish as that; though I will say that there never was a girl with more natural talent for making-up pretty little caps than you. The one I have on has been admired by everybody. Even Ann Woolper this morning, when I was going into the butcher's-book with her—for I insist upon going into the butcher's-book with her weekly, whether she likes it or not; though the way that man puts down the items is so bewildering that I feel myself a perfect baby in her hands,—even Ann admired it, and said how young-looking it is. And then she brought up the time in Fitzgeorge-street, and poor Tom's illness, and almost upset me for the rest of the day. And now, dear, let me offer you my sincere congratulations. Of course, you know that you would always have had a home with me; but service, or at least companionship, is no inheritance, as the proverb says; and for your own sake I'm very glad to think that you are going to have a house of your own. And now tell me what he is like, Monsieur what's-his-name?"

Mrs. Sheldon had been told, but had not remembered the name. Her great anxiety, as well as Charlotte's, was to know what manner of man the affianced lover was. If Diana's future happiness had been contingent on the shape of her husband's nose or the colour of his eyes, these two ladies could not have been more anxious upon the subject.

"Has he long eyelashes, and a dreamy look in his eyes, like Valentine?" asked Charlotte, secretly convinced that her lover had a copyright in these personal graces.

"Does he wear whiskers?" asked Georgy. "I remember, when I was quite a girl, and went to parties at Barlingford, being struck by Mr. Sheldon's whiskers. And I was quite offended with papa, who was always making sarcastic remarks, for calling them mutton-chop whiskers; but they really were the shape of mutton-cutlets at that time. He wears them differently now."

Mrs. Sheldon branched off into a disquisition on whiskers, and Diana escaped from the task of describing her lover. She could not have described him to Georgy.

By and by she asked permission to leave Bayswater for a fortnight, in order to see her lover's home and friends.

"I will come back to you, and stay as long as you like, dear Mrs. Sheldon," she said, "and make you as many caps as you please. And I will make them for you by and by, when I am living abroad, and send them over to you in a bandbox. It will be a great delight to me to be of some little service to a friend who has been so kind. And perhaps you will fancy the caps are prettier when they can boast of being French."

"You darling, generous-minded girl! And you won't go away for a fortnight and never come back again, will you, dear? I had a cook who did that, and left me with a large dinner-party hanging over my head; and how I got through it —with a strange man-cook, who charged a guinea, and used fresh butter, at twenty pence a-pound, as if it had been dirt, and two strange men to wait— I don't know. It all seemed like a dream. And since then we have generally had everything from the confectioner's; and I assure you, to feel that

you can wash your hands of the whole thing, and sit down at the head of your table with your mind as free from care as if you were a visitor, is worth all the expense."

Diana promised she would not behave like the cook; and two days after this conversation left the London Bridge terminus with her father and Gustave Lenoble.

Mr. Sheldon troubled himself very little about this departure. He was informed of Miss Paget's intended marriage; and the information awakened neither surprise nor interest in his heavily-burdened mind.

"A Frenchman, a friend of her father's!" he said; "some swindling adventurer, no doubt," he thought. And this was as much consideration as he could afford to bestow upon Miss Paget's love-affairs at this present time.

CHAPTER V.

ASSURANCE DOUBLY SURE.

On the day after Miss Paget's departure Mr. Sheldon came home from the City rather earlier than usual, and found Charlotte alone in the drawing-room, reading a ponderous volume from Mudie, of an instructive and edifying character, with a view to making herself clever, in order that she might better understand that prodigy of learning, Mr. Hawkehurst.

She was somewhat inclined to yawn over the big book, which contained a graphic account of recent discoveries of an antiquarian nature. Her mind was not yet attuned to the comprehension of the sublimer elements in such discoveries. She saw only a dry-as-dust record of futile gropings in desert sand for the traces of perished empires. Her imagination was not cultivated to that point

whereat the gift which Mr. Lewes calls "insight" becomes the daily companion, nay, indeed, the ever-haunting and nightmare-bringing influence of the dreamer. For her the sands were only sands, the stones were only stones. No splendour of fallen palaces, no glory and pride of perished kings, no clash and clamour of vanished courts, arose from those barren sands, with all their pomp and circumstance, conjured into being by half a word on a broken pillar, or a date upon a Punic monument. Miss Halliday looked up with a sigh of fatigue as her stepfather came into the room. It was not a room that he particularly affected, and she was surprised when he seated himself in the easy-chair opposite her, and poked the fire, as if with the intention of remaining.

"You shouldn't read by firelight, my dear," he said; "it is most destructive to the eyesight."

"I daresay my sight will last my time, papa," the young lady replied carelessly; "but it's very kind of you to think of it, and I won't read any more."

Mr. Sheldon made no reply to this observation.

He sat looking at the fire, with that steady gaze which was habitual to him—the gaze of the man who plans and calculates.

"My dear," he said by and by, "it seems that this money to which you may or may not be entitled is more than we thought at first—in fact, it appears that the sum is a considerable one. I have been, and still am, particularly anxious to guard against disappointment on your part, as I know the effect that such a disappointment is apt to produce upon a person's life. The harassing slowness of Chancery proceedings is proverbial; I am therefore especially desirous that you should not count upon this money."

"I shall never do that, papa. I should certainly like a fine edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* for Valentine, by and by, as he says that is essential for a literary man; and a horse, for people say literary men ought to take horse exercise. But beyond that—"

"We need scarcely go into these details, my dear. I want you to understand the broad facts of the case. While, on the one hand, our success

in obtaining the inheritance which we are about to claim for you is uncertain, on the other hand the inheritance is large. Of course, when I presented you with the sum of five thousand pounds, I had no idea of this possible inheritance."

"O, of course not, papa."

"But I now find that there is such a possibility as your becoming—a—well—a rich woman."

"O, papa!"

"In which case I may conclude that your mother would benefit in some measure from your good fortune."

"Can you doubt that, papa? There should be no measure to her benefit from any money obtained by me."

"I do not doubt that, my dear. And it is with that idea that I wish to make a proposition to you—for your mother's possible advantage."

"I shall be happy to do anything you wish, papa."

"It must be done as a spontaneous act of your own, Charlotte, not in accordance with any wish of mine."

"What is it that I am to do?" asked Charlotte.

"Well, my dear, you see it is agreed between us that if you do get this money, your mother is certain to benefit considerably. But unhappily the proceedings are likely to drag on for an indefinite time; and in the course of that time it comes within the limits of possibility that your decease may precede that of your mother."

"Yes, papa."

"In which case your mother would lose all hope of any such advantage."

"Of course, papa."

Charlotte could not help thinking that there was something sordid in this discussion—this calculation of possible gain or loss, contingent on her fresh young life. But she concluded that it was the nature of business men to see everything from a debased stand-point, and that Mr. Sheldon was no more sordid than other men of his class.

"Well, papa?" she asked presently, after some moments of silence, during which she and

her stepfather had both been absorbed in the contemplation of the fire.

"Well, my dear," replied Mr. Sheldon slowly, "I have been thinking that the natural and easy way of guarding against all contingencies would be by your effecting an insurance on your life, in your mother's favour."

"No, no, papa!" cried Charlotte, with unwonted vehemence, "I would rather do anything than that!"

"What can be your objection to such a very simple arrangement?"

"I daresay my objection seems foolish, childish even, papa; but I really have a horror of life insurances. I always think of papa — my own poor father, whom I loved so dearly. It seemed as if he put a price upon his life for us. He was so anxious to insure his life—I remember hearing him talk of it at Hyley, when I was a child—to make things straight, as he said, for us; and, you see, very soon afterwards he died."

"But you can't suppose the insurance of his life had anything to do with his death?"

"Of course not, I am not so childish as that; only—"

"Only you have a foolish lackadaisical prejudice against the only means by which you can protect your mother against a contingency that is so remote as to be scarcely worth consideration. Let it pass."

There was more anger in the tone than in the words. It was not that angry tone, but the mention of her mother, that impressed Miss Halliday. She began to consider that her objections were both foolish and selfish.

"If you really think I ought to insure my life, I will do so," she said presently. "Papa did as much for those he loved; why should I be less thoughtful of others?"

Having once brought Miss Halliday to this frame of mind, the rest was easy. It was agreed between them that as Valentine Hawkehurst was to be kept in ignorance of his betrothed's claim to certain moneys now in the shadowy under-world of Chancery, so he must be kept in ignorance of the insurance.

It was only one more secret, and Charlotte had learned that it was possible to keep a secret from her lover.

"I suppose before we are married I shall be able to tell him everything?" she said.

"Certainly, my dear. All I want is to test his endurance and his prudence. If the course of events proves him worthy of being trusted, I will trust him."

"I am not afraid of that, papa."

"Of course not, my dear. But, you see, I have to protect your interests; and I cannot afford to see this gentleman with your eyes. I am compelled to be prudent."

The stockbroker sighed as he said this—a sigh of utter weariness. Remorse was unknown to him; the finer fibres upon which that chord is struck had not been employed in the fabrication of his heart. But there is a mental fatigue which is a spurious kind of remorse, and has all the anguish of the nobler feeling. It is an utter weariness and prostration of spirit—a sickness of heart and mind—a bitter longing to lie down and die—the

weariness of a beaten hound rather than of a baffled man.

This was what Mr. Sheldon felt, as the threads of the web which he was weaving multiplied, and grew daily and hourly more difficult of manipulation. Success in the work which he had to do depended on so many contingencies. Afar off glittered the splendid goal—the undisputed possession of the late John Haygarth's hundred thousand pounds; but between the schemer and that chief end and aim of all his plottings, what a sea of troubles! He folded his arms behind his head, and looked across the girlish face of his companion into the shadow and the darkness. In those calculations which were for ever working themselves out in this man's brain, Charlotte Halliday was only one among many figures. She had her fixed value in every sum; but her beauty, her youth, her innocence, her love, her trust, made no unit of that fixed figure, nor weighed in the slightest degree with him who added up the sum. Had she been old, ugly, obnoxious, a creature scarcely fit to live, she would have represented exactly the

same amount in the calculations of Philip Sheldon. The graces that made her beautiful were graces that he had no power to estimate. He knew she was a pretty woman; but he knew also that there were pretty women to be seen in any London street; and the difference between his stepdaughter and the lowest of womankind who passed him in his daily walks, was to him little more than a social prejudice.

The insurance business being once decided on, Mr. Sheldon lost no time in putting it into execution. Although he made a point of secrecy as regarded Mr. Hawkehurst, he went to work in no underhand manner, but managed matters after a highly artistic and superior fashion. He took his stepdaughter to the offices of Greenwood and Greenwood, and explained her wishes to one of those gentlemen in her presence. If he dwelt a little more on Miss Halliday's anxiety for her mother's pecuniary advantage than his previous conversation with Miss Halliday warranted; the young lady was too confiding and too diffident to con-

tradict him. She allowed him to state, or rather to imply, that the proposed insurance was her spontaneous wish, an emanation of her anxious and affectionate heart, the natural result of an almost morbid care for her mother's welfare.

Mr. Hargrave Greenwood, of Greenwood and Greenwood, seemed at first inclined to throw cold water on the proposition, but after some little debate, agreed that extreme caution would certainly counsel such a step.

"I should imagine there was no better life amongst the inhabitants of London," he said, "than Miss Shel—pardon me—Miss Halliday's. But as the young lady herself suggests, 'in the midst of life we are—'; and, as the young lady herself has observed, these things are—ahem—beyond human foresight. If there were any truth in the aphorisms of poets, I should say Miss Halliday cannot insure too quickly; for the remark of Cowper—or, stay, I believe Pope—'whom the gods love die young,' might very well be supposed to apply to so charming a young lady. Happily, the secretaries of insurance-offices know

very little about the poets, unless, indeed, Miss Halliday were to go to the Royal Widow's and Orphan's Hope, the secretary of which is the author of dramas that may fairly rank with the works of Knowles and Lytton."

Mr. Greenwood, an elderly gentleman of the ponderous and port-wine school, laughed at his own small jokes, and took things altogether pleasantly. He gave Mr. Sheldon a letter of introduction to the secretary of his pet insurance company, the value of which to that gentleman was considerable. Nor was this the only advantage derived from the interview. The lawyer's approval of the transaction reassured Charlotte; and though she had heard her own views somewhat misrepresented, she felt that an operation which appeared wise in the sight of such a lawyer, standing on such a Turkey hearthrug, commanding such gentlemanly-looking clerks as those who came and went at Mr. Greenwood's bidding, must inevitably be a proceeding at once prudent and proper.

The business of the insurance was not quite

so easy as the interview with the lawyer. The doctor to whom Miss Halliday was introduced seemed very well satisfied with that young lady's appearance of health and spirits, but in a subsequent interview with Mr. Sheldon asked several questions, and shook his head gravely when told that her father had died at thirty-seven years of age. But he looked less grave when informed that Mr. Halliday had died of a bilious fever.

"Did Mr. Halliday die in London?" he asked.

"He did."

"I should like—ahem—if it were possible, to see the medical man who attended him. These fevers rarely prove fatal unless there is some predisposing cause."

"In this case there was none."

"You speak rather confidently, Mr. Sheldon, as a non-professional man."

"I speak with a certain amount of professional knowledge. I knew Tom Halliday for many years."

Mr. Sheldon forbore to state that Tom Halliday had died in his house, and had been at-

tended by him. It is, perhaps, only natural that Philip Sheldon the stockbroker of repute should wish to escape identification with Philip Sheldon the unsuccessful dentist of Bloomsbury.

After a little more conversational skirmishing, the confidential physician of the Prudential Step Assurance Company agreed to consider that Mr. Halliday's constitution had been in no manner compromised by his early death, and to pass Charlotte's life. The motives for effecting the insurance were briefly touched upon in Mr. Greenwood's letter of introduction, and appeared very proper and feasible in the eyes of the directors; so, after a delay of a few days, the young lady found herself accepted, and Mr. Sheldon put away among his more important papers a large oblong envelope, containing a policy of assurance on his step-daughter's life for five thousand pounds. He did not, however, stop here, but made assurance doubly sure by effecting a second insurance upon the same young life, with the Widow's and Orphan's Friend Society, within a few days of the first transaction.

Book the Fifth.

DIANA IN NORMANDY.

CHAPTER I.

AT CÔTENOIR.

Beaubocage, near Vevinord, March 15, 186-.

My darling Lotta,—As you extorted from me a solemn pledge that I would write you a full and detailed account of my adventures, I seat myself in Mademoiselle Lenoble's pretty little turret chamber, in the hope of completing the first instalment of my work, before papa or Gustave summons me to prepare for a drive and visit to the Convent of the Sacred Heart, which I believe has been planned for to-day.

What am I to tell you, dear, and how shall I begin my story? Let me fancy myself sitting at your feet before your bed-room fire, and you looking down at me with that pretty inquisitive

look in your dear gray eyes. Do you know that M. Lenoble's eyes are almost the colour of yours, Lotta? You asked me a dozen questions about his eyes the other day, and I could give you no clear description of them; but yesterday, as he stood at the window looking out across the garden, I saw their real colour. It is gray, a deep clear gray, and his lashes are dark, like yours. How shall I begin? That is the grand difficulty! I suppose you will want to know something even about the journey. Everything was very pleasant, in spite of the cold blusterous March weather. Do you know what my last journey was like, Lotta? It was the long dreary journey from Forêtdechêne to St. Katharine's Wharf, when Mr. Hawkehurst advised and arranged my return to England. I had been sitting quite alone in a balcony overlooking the little town. It was after midnight, but the lights were still burning; I can see the lamplit windows shining through the night mist as I write this, and the sense of the hopeless misery of that time comes back to me like the breath of some freezing wind. I can

find no words to tell you how desolate I was that night, or how hopeless.

I dared not think of my future life; or of the next day, that was to be the beginning of that hopeless future. I was obliged to bind my thoughts to the present and all its dreariness; and a kind of dull apathetic feeling, which was too dull for despair, took possession of me that night. While I was sitting there, Mr. Hawkehurst came to me, and told me that my father had become involved in a quarrel, under circumstances of a very shameful nature, which I need not tell you, darling. He recommended me to leave Forêtdechêne—indeed, almost insisted that I should do so. He wanted to rescue me from that miserable life. Your lover had noble and generous impulses even then, you see, dear; at his worst he was not all bad, and needed only your gentle influence to purify and elevate his character. He gave me all the money he possessed to pay the expenses of my journey. Ah, what a dreary journey! I left Forêtdechêne in the chill daybreak, and travelled third-class,

with dreadful Belgians who smelt of garlic, to Antwerp. I slept at a very humble inn near the quay, and started for England by the Baron Osy at noon next day. I cannot tell you how lonely I felt on board the steamer. I had travelled uncomfortably before, but never without my father and Valentine — and he had been always kind to me. If we were shabbily dressed, and people thought ill of us, I did not care. The spirit of Bohemianism must have been very strong with me in those days. I remembered how we had sat together on the same boat watching the sleepy shores of Holland, or making fun of our respectable fellow-passengers. Now I was quite alone. People stared at me rudely and unkindly, as I thought. I could not afford to dine or breakfast with the rest; and I was weak enough to feel wounded by the idea that people would guess my motive for shunning the savoury banquets that sent up such horrid odours to the deck where I sat, trying to read a tattered Tauchnitz novel. And the end of my journey? Ah, Charlotte, you can never imagine what it is to travel like

that, without knowing whether there is any haven, any shelter for you at the end of your wanderings! I knew that at a certain hour we were to arrive at St. Katherine's Dock, but beyond that I knew nothing. I counted my money. There was just enough to pay for a cab that would carry me to Hyde Lodge. I should land there penniless. And what if my cousin Priscilla should refuse to receive me? For a moment I fancied even that possible. And I pictured myself walking about London, hungry and homeless.

This was my last journey. I have dwelt upon it longer than I need have done; but I want you to understand what it is that makes Gustave Lenoble dear to me. If you could feel the contrast between the past and the present, as I felt it when I stood on the deck of the Dover packet with him by my side, you would know why I love him, and am grateful to him. We stood side by side, watching the waves and talking of our future, while my father enjoyed a nap in

one of the little deck cabins. To Gustave that future seems very bright and clear; to me it seems unutterably strange that the future *can* be anything but a dismal *terra incognita*, from the contemplation of which it is wise to refrain.

Papa stays with Gustave at Côtenoir; but it had been arranged for me to visit Mademoiselle Lenoble, Gustave's aunt, at Beaubocage, and to remain with her during my stay in Normandy. I at once understood the delicate feeling which prompted this arrangement. We dined at Rouen, and came to Vevinord in a coach. At Vevinord a queer little countrified vehicle met us, with a very old man, of the farm-servant class, as coachman. Gustave took the reins from the old man's hand and drove to Beaubocage, where Mademoiselle Lenoble received me with much cordiality. She is a dear old lady, with silvery bands of hair neatly arranged under the prettiest of caps. Her gown is black silk, and her collar and cuffs of snowy whiteness; everything about her exquisitely neat, and of the fashion of twenty, or perhaps thirty, years ago.

And now, I suppose, you will want to know what Beaubocage is like. Well, dear, much as I admire Mademoiselle Lenoble, I must confess that her ancestral mansion is neither grand nor pretty. It might have made a very tolerable farmhouse, but has been spoiled by the architect's determination to make it a château. It is a square, white building, with two pepper-castor-like turrets, in one of which I write this letter. Between the garden and the high-road there is a wall, surmounted with plaster vases. The garden is for the greater part utilitarian; but in front of the salon windows there is a grass-plot, bordered by stiff gravel-walks, and relieved by a couple of flower-beds. A row of tall poplars alone screens the house from the dusty high-road. At the back of it there is an orchard; on one side a farm-yard; behind the orchard lie the fields that compose the farm of Beaubocage and the paternal estate of the Lenoble family. All around, the country is very flat. The people seem to be kind and simple, and devotedly attached to "Mademoiselle." There is a rustic peacefulness per-

vading everything, which, for me, stands instead of beauty.

I am hypocrite enough to pretend to be pleased with everything, for I can perceive how anxiously M. Lenoble watches me in order to discover whether I like his native country. He was not born at Beaubocage, but in Paris. Mademoiselle Lenoble told me the story of his childhood, and how she brought him to Beaubocage, when quite a little fellow, from Rouen, where his father died. About his mother there seems to have been some mystery. Mademoiselle told me nothing of this, except that her brother, Gustave the elder, made a love-match, and thereby offended his father. She has the little crib in which her nephew, Gustave the younger, slept on the night of his coming. It had been his father's little bed thirty years before. She shed tears as she told me the story, and how she sat and watched by the little fellow as he cried himself to sleep with his head lying on her arm, and the summer moonlight shining full upon his face.

I was deeply touched by her manner as she

told me these things; and I think, if I had not already learned to love M. Lenoble, I should love him for the sake of his aunt. She is charming; a creature so innocent and pure, that one considers one's words in speaking to her, almost as if she were a child. She is about forty years older than I; yet for worlds I would not tell her of the people and the scenes I have beheld at foreign watering-places and gambling-rooms. She has spent the sixty years of her life so completely out of the world, that she has retained the freshness and sweetness of her youth untainted in the least degree. Can there be magical philtre equal to this—a pure unselfish life, far away from the clamour of cities?

The old servant who waits upon me is seventy-five years of age, and remembers Ma'amselle Cydalise from her childhood. She is always singing the praises of her mistress, and she sees that I like to hear them. "Ah, ma'amselle," she said to me, "to marry a Lenoble is to marry one of the angels. I will not say that the old seigneur was not hard towards his son. Ah, yes, but it was a

noble heart. And the young monsieur—that one who died in Rouen, the Poor!—ah, that he was kind, that he was gracious! What of tears, what of regrets, when the Old chased him!"

My position is quite recognised. I think the very cowboy in the farmyard—a broad-shouldered lad, with a good-natured mindless face, and prodigious wooden shoes like clumsy canoes—even the cowboy knows that I am to be Madame Lenoble of Côtenoir. Côtenoir is the Windsor Castle of this district; Beaubocage is only Frogmore. Yes, dear, the bond is signed and sealed. Even if I did not love M. Lenoble, I have bound myself to marry him; but I do love him, and thank him with all my heart for having given a definite end and aim to my life. Don't think I underrate your kindness, darling; I know that I should never want a home while you could give me one. But 'tis hard to be a hanger-on in any household; and Valentine will exact all his sweet young wife's love and care.

I have written you a letter which I am sure will require double postage; so I will say no more

except good-bye. Take care of yourself, dear one. Practise your part in our favourite duets; remember your morning walk in the garden; and don't wear out your eyes over the big books that Mr. Hawkehurst is obliged to read.

Ever your affectionate

DIANA.

From Charlotte Halliday to Diana Paget.

The dullest house in Christendom. Monday.

EVER DEAREST DI,—Your letter was a welcome relief to the weariness of my existence. How I wish I were with you! But that is too bright a dream. I am sure I should idolise Beaubocage. I should not mind the dismal row of poplars, or the flat landscape, or the dusty road, or anything, so long as it was not like Bayswater. I languish for a change, dear. I have seen so little of the world, except the dear moorland farmhouse at Newhall. I don't think I was ever created to be "cabined, cribbed, confined," in such a narrow life as this, amid such a dull, unchanging round of daily commonplace. Sometimes, when

the cold spring moon is shining over the tree-tops in Kensington-gardens, I think of Switzerland, and the snow-clad mountains and fair Alpine valleys we have read of and talked of, until my heart aches at the thought that I may never see them; and to think that there are people in whom the word 'Savoy' awakes no fairer image than a cabbage! Ah, my poor dear! isn't it almost wicked of me to complain, when *you* have had such bitter experience of the hard cruel world?

I am quite in love with your dear Mademoiselle Lenoble; almost as deeply as I am in love with your magnanimous, chivalrous, generous, audacious—everything ending in *ous*—Monsieur Lenoble.

How dare you call him M. Lenoble, by the by? I have counted the occasions on which you write of him in your nice long letter, and for one Gustave, there are half-a-dozen M. Lenobles. It must be Gustave in future to me, remember.

What shall I tell you, dear? I have nothing to tell, really nothing. To say that I wish you were with me is only to confess that I am very

selfish; but I *do* wish for you, dear—my friend and adopted sister, my old school companion, from whom, willingly, I have never concealed one thought.

Valentine called on Tuesday afternoon; but I have nothing to tell you even about him. Mamma dozed in her corner after her cup of tea, and Val and I sat by the fire talking over our future, just like you and M. Lenoble on board the Calais boat. How much engaged people find to say about the future! Is it our love that makes it seem so bright, so different from all that has gone before? I cannot fancy life with Valentine otherwise than happy. I strive to picture trials, and fancy myself in prison with him, the wind blowing in at broken windows, the rain coming through the dilapidated roof and pattering on the carpetless floor; but the most dismal picture I can paint won't seem dismal if his figure is a part of it. We would stop the broken windows with rags and paper, we would wipe up the rain with our pocket-handkerchiefs, and sit side by side and talk of the future, as we do now. Hope could never abandon us while

we were together. And then, sometimes, while I am looking at Valentine, the thought that he might die comes to me suddenly, like the touch of an icy hand upon my heart.

I lie awake at night sometimes thinking of this, and of papa's early death. He came home one night with a cold, and from that hour grew worse until he died. Ah, think what misery for a wife to suffer! Happily for mamma, she is not capable of suffering intensely. She was very sorry, and even now when she speaks of papa she cries a little; but the tears don't hurt her. I think, indeed, they give her a kind of pleasure.

See, dear, what a long egotistical letter I have written, after all. I will say no more, except that while I am delighted to think of your pleasure among new friends and new scenes, my selfish heart still longs for the hour that is to bring you back to me.

Pray tell me all you can about your daughters that are to be.

Ever and ever your loving

CHARLOTTE.

From Diana Paget to Charlotte Halliday.

Beaubocage, near Vevinord,
March 30, 186–.

My dear Lotta,—In three days more I hope to be with you; but I suppose, in the mean time, I must keep my promise, and send you a faithful account of my life here. Everyone here is more kind to me than words can tell; and I have nothing left to wish for, except that you were here, to be delighted, as I am sure you would be, with the freshness and the strangeness of everything. If I ever do become Madame Lenoble — and even yet I *cannot* picture to myself that such a thing will be—you must come to Côtenoir, you and Valentine. I was taken through every room in the old château the day before yesterday, and I fixed in my own mind upon the rooms I will give you, if these things come to pass. They are very old rooms, and I can fancy what strange people must have lived in them, and died in them perhaps, in the days that are gone. But if you come to them, they shall be made bright and pretty, and we will chase the shadows of the mediæval age

away. There are old pictures, old musical instruments, quaint spindle-legged chairs and tables, tapestries that crumble as you touch them—the ashes and relics of many generations. Gustave says we will sweep these poor vestiges away, and begin a new life, when I come to Côtenoir; but I cannot find it in my heart to obliterate every trace of those dead feet that have come and gone in all the dusky passages of my future home.

And now I must tell you about my daughters that are to be — my daughter that is, I may say of the elder, — for I love her so well already, that no breach between Gustave and me could rob her of my affection. She is the dearest, most loving of creatures; and she reminds me of you! I daresay you will laugh at this, dear; and, mind, I do not say that Clarice Lenoble is actually like you in complexion or feature,—those common attributes which every eye can see; the resemblance is far more subtle. There is a look in this dear girl's face, a smile, an I-know-not-what, which every now and then recalls your own bright countenance. You will

say this is mere fancy,—and that is what I told myself at the first; but I found afterwards that it is no fancy, but really one of those vague, indefinable, accidental likenesses which one perceives so often. To me it seems a very happy accident; for my first glance at my daughter's face told me that I should love her for your sake.

We went to the convent the day before yesterday. It is a curious old place, and was once a stately château, the habitation of a noble family. A little portress, in the black robes of a lay sister, admitted us, and conducted us to the parlour, a fine old room, decorated with pictures of a religious character painted by members of the sisterhood. Here Gustave and I were received by the superioress, an elderly woman with a mild, holy face, and a quiet grace of manner which might become a duchess. She sent for the demoiselles Lenoble, and after a delay of a quarter of an hour—you remember the toilet the girls at Hyde Lodge were obliged to make before they went to the drawing-room, Lotta—Mademoiselle Lenoble came, a tall, slim, lovely and lovable girl, who reminded me of

the dearest friend I have in this world. She ran to her papa first, and saluted him with an enthusiastic hug; and then she stood for a moment looking shyly at me, confused and doubtful. It was only for a moment she was left in doubt. Gustave bent down to whisper something in her ear—something for which his letters had in some manner prepared her. The fair young face brightened, the clear gray eyes looked up at me, with a sweet, affectionate gaze, and she came to me and kissed me. "I shall love you very much," she whispered. "And I love you very much already," I answered, in the same confidential manner. And I think these few words, that one pretty, confiding look in her innocent eyes, made a tie between us that it would take much to loosen. Ah, Lotta, what a wide gulf between the Diana Paget who landed alone at St. Katharine's wharf, in the dim, cheerless dawn, and uncertain where to find a shelter in all that busy city, and the same creature redeemed by your affection, and exalted by the love and trust of Gustave Lenoble!

After this, my second daughter appeared —

a pretty young hoyden, with lovable clinging ways; and then the superioress asked if I would like to see the garden. Of course I said yes, and we were taken through the long corridors, out into a fine old garden, where the pupils, who looked like the Hyde-Lodge girls translated into French, were prancing and scampering about in the usual style. After the garden, we went to the chapel, where there were more pictures, and flower-bedecked altars, and pale twinkling tapers, burning here and there in the chill sunlight. Here there were damsels engaged in pious meditation, from five years old upwards. They send even the little ones to meditate, Clarice tells me; and there were these infants kneeling before the flower-bedecked altars, rapt in religious contemplation, like so many St. Thomas à Kempises. The young meditators glanced slyly at us as we passed. When they had shown me everything of special interest in the pleasant old place, Clarice and Madelon ran off to dress for walking, in order to accompany us to Côtenoir, where we were to dine.

It was quite a family party. Mademoiselle Lenoble was there, and papa. He arrived at the château while Gustave and I were paying our visit to the convent. He is in the highest spirits, and treats me with an amount of affection and courtesy I have not been accustomed to receive at his hands. Of course I know the cause of this change; the future mistress of Côtenoir is a very different person from that wretched girl who was nothing to him but a burden and an encumbrance. But even while I despise him, I cannot refuse to pity him. One forgives anything in old age. In this, at least, it is a second childhood; and my father is very old, Lotta. I saw the look of age in his face more plainly at Côtenoir, where he assumed his usual *débonnaire*, man-of-the-world tone and manner, than I had seen it in London, when he was a professed invalid. He is much changed since I was with him at Forêtdechêne. It seems as if he had kept Time at bay very long, and now at last the common enemy will be held at arm's-length no longer. He still braces himself up in the old military manner, still holds him-

self more erect than many men of half his age; but, in spite of all this, I can see that he is very feeble; shaken and worn by a long life of difficulty. I am glad to think that there will be a haven for him at last; and if I did not thank Gustave with my whole heart for giving me a home and a place in the world, I should thank him for giving a shelter to my father.

And now, dear, as I hope to be with you so very soon, I shall say no more. I am to spend a day in Rouen before we come back—papa and I, that is to say; Gustave stays in Normandy to make some arrangements before he comes back to England. I cannot comprehend the business relations between him and papa; but there is some business going on—law business, as it seems to me—about which papa is very important and elated.

I am to see the cathedral and churches at Rouen, and I shall contrive to see the shops, and to bring you something pretty. Papa has given me money—the first he ever gave me unasked. I have very little doubt it comes from Gustave; but

I have no sense of shame in accepting it. M. Lenoble's seems to me a royal nature, formed to bestow benefits and bounties on every side.

Tell Mrs. Sheldon that I shall bring her the prettiest cap I can find in Rouen; and, with all love, believe me ever your affectionate

DIANA.

Book the Sixth.

A CLOUD OF FEAR.

CHAPTER I.

THE BEGINNING OF SORROW.

Who heeds the cloud no bigger than a man's hand amidst a broad expanse of blue ether? The faint, scarce perceptible menace of that one little cloud is lost in the wide brightness of a summer sky. The traveller jogs on contented and unthinking, till the hoarse roar of stormy winds, or the first big drops of the thunder-shower, startle him with a sudden consciousness of the coming storm.

It was early May, and the young leaves were green in the avenues of Kensington Gardens; Bayswater was bright and gay with fashionable people; and Mrs. Sheldon found herself strong enough to enjoy her afternoon drive in Hyde Park, where the contemplation of the bonnets afforded her perennial delight.

"I think they are actually smaller than ever this year," she remarked every season; and every season the headgear of fashionable London did indeed seem to shrink and dwindle, "fine by degrees, and beautifully less." The coalscuttle-shaped head-dress of our grandmothers had not yet resolved itself into a string of beads and a rosebud in these days; but was obviously tending thitherward.

Charlotte and Diana accompanied Mrs. Sheldon in her drives. The rapture of contemplating the bonnets was not complete unless the lady had some sympathising spirit to share her delight. The two girls were very well pleased to mingle in that brilliant crowd, and to go back to their own quiet life when the mystic hour came, and that bright vision of colour and beauty melted into the twilight loneliness. It had seemed just lately, however, as if Charlotte was growing a little weary of the gorgeous spectacle—the ever-changing, ever-splendid diorama of West-end life. She no longer exclaimed at the sight of each exceptional toilette; she no longer smiled

admiringly on the thorough-bred horses champing their bits in the immediate neighbourhood of her bonnet; she no longer gave a little cry of delight when the big drags came slowly along the crowded ranks, the steel bars shining as they swung loosely in the low afternoon sunlight, the driver conscious of his glory, grave and tranquil, with the pride that apes humility.

"See, Lotta," said Miss Paget, upon an especially bright May evening, as one of these gorgeous equipages went past Mr. Sheldon's landau, "there's another drag. Did you see it?"

"Yes, dear, I saw it."

"And are you tired of four-in-hands? You used to admire them so much."

"I admire them as much as ever, dear."

"And yet you scarcely gave those four splendid roans a glance."

"No," Charlotte answered, with a faint sigh.

"Are you tired, Lotta?" Miss Paget asked rather anxiously. There was something in Charlotte's manner of late that had inspired her with

a vague sense of anxiety; some change which she could scarcely define—a change so gradual that it was only by comparing the Charlotte of some months ago with the Charlotte of the present, that she perceived how real a change it was. The buoyancy and freshness, the girlish vivacity of Miss Halliday's manner, were rapidly giving place to habitual listlessness. "Are you tired, dear?" she repeated anxiously; and Mrs. Sheldon looked round from her contemplation of the bonnets.

"No, Di dearest, not tired; but—I don't feel very well this afternoon."

This was the first confession which Charlotte Halliday made of a sense of weakness and languor that had been creeping upon her during the last two months, so slowly, so gradually, that the change seemed too insignificant for notice.

"You feel ill, Lotta dear?" Diana asked.

"Well, no, not exactly ill. I can scarcely call it illness; I feel rather weak—that is really all."

At this point Mrs. Sheldon chimed in, with her eyes on a passing bonnet as she spoke.

"You see, you are so dreadfully neglectful of

your papa's advice, Lotta," she said, in a complaining tone.—"Do *you* like pink roses with mauve areophane, Diana? *I* do not. Look at that primrose tulle, with dead ivy-leaves and scarlet berries, in the barouche.—I daresay you have not taken your glass of old port this morning, Charlotte, and have only yourself to thank if you feel weak."

"I did take a glass of port this morning, mamma. I don't like it; but I take it every morning."

"Don't like old tawny port, that your papa bought at the sale of a bishop of somewhere? It's perfectly absurd of you, Lotta, to talk of not liking wine that cost fifteen shillings a bottle, and which your papa's friends declare to be worth five-and-thirty."

"I am sorry it is so expensive, mamma; but I can't teach myself to think it nice," answered Charlotte with a smile that sadly lacked the brightness of a few weeks ago. "I think one requires to go into the City, and become a merchant or a stockbroker, before one can like that

sort of wine. What was it Valentine quoted in the *Cheapside*, about some lady whom somebody loved?—'To love her was a liberal education.' I think to like old port is a commercial education."

"I am sure such wine *ought* to do you good," said Georgy almost querulously. She thought this bright, blooming creature had no right to be ill. The headaches, and little weaknesses and languors and ladylike ailments, were things for which she (Georgy) had taken out a patent; and this indisposition of her daughter's was an infringement of copyright.

"I daresay the port will do me good, mamma, in time. No doubt I shall be as strong as that person who strangled lions and snakes, and dogs with incalculable heads, and all that kind of thing."

"I really wish you would not talk in that absurd manner, my dear," said Mrs. Sheldon, with offended dignity. "I think you really cannot be too grateful for your papa's kind thoughtfulness and anxiety about you. I am sure I myself am not so anxious as he is; but of course his medical knowledge makes him doubly care-

ful. Six weeks ago he noticed that you wanted strength—tone is what he calls it. 'Georgina,' he said to me, 'Charlotte wants tone. She is beginning to stoop in a really lamentable manner: we must make her take port or bark, or something of a strengthening kind.' And then a day or two afterwards he decided on port, and gave me the key of the cellar—which is a thing he rarely gives out of his own hands—and told me the number of the bin from which I was to take the wine—some old wine that he had laid by on purpose for some special occasion; and no one is to have it but you, and you are to take a glass daily at eleven o'clock. Mr. Sheldon is most particular about the hour. The regularity of the thing is half the battle in these cases, he says; and I am sure if you do not observe his wishes and mine, Charlotte, it will be really ungrateful of you."

"But, dear mamma, I do observe Mr.—papa's wishes. I take my glass of port every morning at eleven. I go to your cupboard in the breakfast-room and take out my special decanter, and my

special glass, in the most punctiliously precise manner. I don't like the wine, and I don't like the trouble involved in the ceremony of drinking it; but I go through it most religiously to please you and papa."

"And do you mean to say that you do not feel stronger after taking that expensive old port regularly for nearly six weeks?"

"I am sorry to say that I do not, mamma. I think, if there is any change, it is that I am weaker."

"Dear, dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Sheldon captiously, "you are really a most extraordinary girl."

Mrs. Sheldon could almost have found it in her heart to say, a most ungrateful girl. There did seem a kind of ingratitude in this futile consumption of old port at fifteen shillings a bottle.

"I'll tell you what it is, Lotta," she said presently, "I am convinced that your illness—or your weakness—is all fancy."

"Why so, mamma?"

"Because, if it were real weakness, that old

port *must* have made you stronger. And the fact that the port does you no good, is a proof that your weakness is only fancy. Girls of your age are so full of fancies. Look at me, and the martyrdom I go through with my nervous headaches, which perfectly prostrate me, after the least worry or excitement. The nerves of my head, after going into the butcher's book, are perfect agony. When you come to have a house to look after, and find what it is to have the same saddle-of-mutton charged for twice over, with the most daring impudence—or to have capers and currie-powder, that you *know* you've never had, staring at you from every page of your grocer's book, and nothing but your memory between you and utter ruin—you'll discover what it is to be really ill."

In this easy manner did Mrs. Sheldon dismiss the subject of her daughter's illness. But it was not so easily dismissed by Diana Paget, who loved her friend with a profound and pure affection, than which no sister's love was ever warmer or stronger. Even Valentine's preference for this happy rival had not lessened Diana's love for her friend and

benefactress. She had been jealous of Charlotte's happier fate; but in the hour when this jealousy was most bitter there had been no wavering in her attachment to this one true and generous friend.

Miss Paget was very silent during the homeward drive. She understood now what that change had been in her friend which until now had so perplexed her. It was a decay of physical strength which had robbed Lotta's smile of its brightness, her laugh of its merry music. It was physical languor that made her so indifferent to the things which had once awakened her girlish enthusiasm. The discovery was a very painful one. Diana remembered her experience of Hyde Lodge: the girls who had grown day by day more listless, now in the doctor's hands for a day or two, now well again and toiling at the old tread-mill round of study, now sinking into confirmed invalids; until the bitter hour in which parents are summoned, and the doctor urges rest, and the fond mother carries her darling home, assured that home comfort and tenderness will speedily restore her. Her schoolfellows cluster round the carriage to bid her

"good-bye until next half," full of hopeful talk about her swift recovery. But when the vacation is over, and Black Monday comes, she is not amongst the returning scholars. Has she not gone up to the higher school, and answered *Adsum* to the call of the Great Master?

Diana remembered these old experiences with cruel pain.

"Girls, as bright and lovable as she is, have drooped and faded away, just when they seemed brightest and happiest," she thought as she watched Charlotte, and perceived to-day for the first time that the outline of her fair young cheek had lost its perfect roundness.

But in such a case love can do nothing except watch and wait. That night, in the course of that girlish talk in Charlotte's bedroom, which had become a habit with the two girls, Diana extorted from her friend a full account of the symptoms which had affected her within the last few weeks.

"Pray don't look so anxious, dear Di," she said gaily; "it is really nothing worth talking of; and I knew that if I confessed to feeling ill, you

and mamma would straightway begin to worry yourselves about me. I have felt a little sick and faint sometimes; and now and then a sudden dizziness has come over me. It is nothing of any consequence, and it passes away very quickly. Sometimes I have a kind of torpid, languid feeling, which is scarcely unpleasant, only strange, you know. But what does it all amount to, except that I am nervous?"

"You must have change of air, Lotta," said Diana resolutely, "and change of scene. Yes, no doubt you are nervous. You have been kept almost a prisoner in the house through Mr. Sheldon's punctilious nonsense. You miss our brisk morning walks in the Gardens, I daresay. If you were to go to Yorkshire, now, to your friends at Newhall, you would like that change, dear, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I should dearly like to see Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Joe; but—"

"But what, darling?"

"I should scarcely like being at Newhall, unless—you'll think me very foolish, Di—unless

Valentine was with me. We were so happy there, you see, dear; and it was there he first told me he loved me. No, Di, I couldn't bear Newhall without him."

"Poor Aunt Dorothy, poor Uncle Joe! feathers when weighed in the scale against a young man whom their niece has known less than a twelvemonth!"

No more was said about Charlotte's illness; Diana was too prudent to alarm her friend by any expression of uneasiness. She adopted a cheering tone, and the conversation drifted into other channels.

While Diana's concern for her friend's altered health was yet a new feeling, she found herself called upon to attend her father once more in the character of a ministering angel. And this time Captain Paget's illness was something more than gout. It was, according to his doctors—he had on this occasion two medical attendants—a general breaking-up of the system. The poor old wanderer,—the weary Odysseus, hero of so many

trickeries, such varied adventures,—laid himself down to rest, within view of the Promised Land for which his soul yearned.

He was very ill. Gustave Lenoble, who came back to London, did not conceal from Diana that the illness threatened to end fatally. At his instigation the Captain had been removed from Omega-street to pleasant lodgings at the back of Knightsbridge-road, overlooking Hyde Park. This was nearer Bayswater; and it was very pleasant for the fading old worldling. He could see the stream of fashion flowing past as he sat in his easy-chair, propped up with pillows, with the western sunlight on his face. He pointed out the liveries and armorial bearings; and told many scandalous and entertaining anecdotes of their past and present owners to Gustave Lenoble, who devoted much of his time to the solacement of the invalid. Everything that affection could do to smooth this dreary time was done for the tired Ulysses. Pleasant books were read to him, earnest thoughts were suggested by earnest words; hothouse flowers adorned his cheerful sitting-

room; hothouse fruits gladdened his eye by their rich warmth of colour, and invited his parched lips to taste their cool ripeness. Gustave had a piano brought in, so that Diana might sing to her father in the dusky May evenings, when it should please him to hear her. Upon the last feeble footsteps of this old man, whose life had been very selfish and wicked, pity waited with a carefulness so fond and tender that he might well mistake it for love. Was it fair that his last days should be so peaceful and luxurious, when many a good man falls down to die in the streets, worn out with the life-long effort to bear the burden laid upon his weary shoulders? In the traditions of the Rabbins it is written that those are the elect of God who suffer His chastisement in the flesh. For the others, for those who on earth drain the goblet of pleasure, and riot in the raptures of sin, for them comes the dread retribution after death. They are plunged in the fire, and driven before the wind; they take the shape of loathsome reptiles, and ascend by infinitesimal degrees through all the grades of creation, until their storm-tost,

wearied, degraded souls reënter human semblance once more. But even then their old stand-point is not yet regained; their dread penance not yet performed. As men they are the lowest and worst of men; slaves toiling in the desert; dirt to be trampled under the feet of their prosperous brethren. Inch by inch the wretched soul regains its lost inheritance; cycles must elapse before the awful sentence is fulfilled.

Our Christian faith knows no such horrors. Even for the penitent of the eleventh hour there is promise of pardon. The most earnest desire of Diana's heart was that her father should enroll himself amongst those late penitents—those last among the last who crowd in to the marriage feast, half afraid to show their shame-darkened faces in that glorious company.

If we forgive all things to old age, so much the more surely do we forgive all injuries to the fading enemy. That she had suffered much cruelty and neglect at the hands of her father, was a fact that Diana could not forget, any more than she could forget the name which he had given her.

It was a part of her life, not to be put off, or done away with. But in these last days, with all her heart she forgave and pitied him. She pitied him for the crooked paths into which his feet had wandered at the very outset of life, and from which so weak a soul could find no issue. She pitied him for that moral blindness which had kept him pleasantly unconscious of the supreme depth of his degradation—a social Laplander, who, never having seen a western summer, had no knowledge that his own land was dark and benighted.

Happily for Diana and her generous lover, the Captain was not a difficult penitent. He was indeed a man who, having lost the capacity and the need for sin, took very kindly to penitence, as a species of sentimental luxury.

"Yes, my dear," he said complacently—for even in the hour of his penitence he insisted on regarding himself as a social martyr—"my life has been a very hard one. Fortune has not been kind to me. In the words of the immortal bard, my lines have *not* been set in pleasant places. I should have been glad if Providence had allowed

me to be a better father to you, a better husband to your poor mother—a better Christian, in fact—and had spared me the repeated humiliation of going through the Insolvent Debtors' Court. It is not always easy to understand the justice of these things; and it has often appeared to me that something of the favouritism which is the bane of our governments on earth must needs obtain at a higher tribunal. One man enters life with an entailed estate worth seventy thousand a-year, while another finds himself in the hands of the Jews before he is twenty years of age. 'There's something in this world amiss shall be unriddled by and by,' as the poet observes. The circumstances of my own existence I have ever regarded as dark and enigmatic.—And, indeed, the events of this life are altogether inexplicable, my love. There is that fellow Sheldon, now, who began life as a country dentist, a man without family or connections, who— Well, I will not repine. If I am spared to behold my daughter mistress of a fine estate, although in a foreign country, I can depart in peace. But you must have a house in town, my

dear. Yes, London must be your head-quarters. You must not be buried alive in Normandy. There is no place like London. Take the word of a man who has seen the finest Continental cities, and lived in them—that is the point, my love—lived in them. For a fine afternoon in the beginning of May, an apartment in the Champs Elysées, or the Boulevard, is an earthly paradise; but the Champs Elysées in a wet December—the Boulevard in a sweltering August! London is the only spot upon earth that is never intolerable. And your husband will be a rich man, my dear girl, a really wealthy man; and you must see that he makes a fitting use of his wealth, and does his duty to society. The parable of the Talents, which you were reading to me this afternoon, is a moral lesson your husband must not forget."

After this fashion did the invalid discourse. Gustave and Diana perceived that he still hoped to have his share in their future life, still looked to pleasant days to come in a world which he had loved, not wisely, but too well. Nor could they

find it in their hearts to tell him that his journey was drawing to a close, and that on the very threshold of the peaceful home which his diplomatic arts had helped to secure, he was to abandon life's weary race.

They indulged his hopes a little, in order to win him the more easily to serious thoughts; but though at times quite ready to abandon himself to a penitential mood that was almost maudlin, there were other times when the old Adam asserted himself, and the Captain resented this intrusion of serious subjects as a kind of impertinence.

"I am not aware that I am at my last gasp, Diana," he said with dignity, on one of these occasions; "or that I need to be talked to by my own daughter as if I were on my death-bed. I can show you men some years my senior driving their phaetons-and-pairs in that park. The Gospel is all very well in its place—during Sunday-morning service, and after morning prayers, in your good old county families, where the household is large enough to make a fair show at the end of the dining-room, without bringing in hulking lads

who smell of the stables; but I consider that when a man is ill, there is a considerable want of tact in bringing the subject of religion before him in any obtrusive manner."

Thus the Captain alternated from sentimental penitence to captious worldliness, during many days and weeks. The business of the Haygarthian inheritance was progressing slowly, but surely. Documents were being prepared, attested copies of certificates of marriages, births, baptisms, and burials were being procured, and all was tending towards the grand result. Once, and sometimes twice, a week M. Fleurus came to see Captain Paget, and discussed the great affair with that invalid diplomatist. The Captain had long ago been aware that in entering upon an alliance with that gentleman, he had invoked the aid of a coadjutor likely to prove too strong for him. The event had justified his fears. M. Fleurus had something of Victor Hugo's famous *Poulpe* in his nature. Powerful as flexible were the arms he stretched forth to grasp all prizes in the way of heirs-at-law and disputed heritages,

unclaimed railway stock, and forgotten consols. If the Captain had not played his cards very cleverly, and contrived to obtain a personal influence over Gustave Lenoble, he might have found himself thrust entirely out of the business by one of the Frenchman's gelatinous arms. Happily for his own success, however, the Captain did obtain a strong hold upon Gustave. This enabled him to protect his own interests throughout the negotiation, and to keep the insidious Fleurus at bay.

"My good friend," he said, in his grand Carleton House manner, "I am bound to protect the interests of my friend M. Lenoble, in any agreement to be entered upon in this matter. I cannot permit M. Lenoble's generosity or M. Lenoble's inexperience to be imposed upon. My own interests are of secondary importance. That I expect to profit by the extraordinary discovery made by me—by ME—alone and unaided, I do not affect to deny. But I will not profit at the expense of a too generous friend."

"And what recompense am I to have for my work—a work at once painful and impoverish-

ing?" asked the little Frenchman, with an angry and suspicious look. "Do you believe that I do that to amuse me? To run the streets, to go by here, by there, in hunting the papers of that marriage, or this baptism? Believe you that is so agreeable, Monsieur the Captain? No; I desire to be paid for my work. I must have my part in the heritage which I have help to win."

"It is not won yet. We will talk of your recompense by and by."

"We will talk of it this instant—upon the field. It must that I comprehend where I am in this affair. I will not of mystifications, of prevarications, of lies—"

"M. Fleurus!" cried the Captain, with a hand stretched towards the bell.

"You will sound—you will chase me! Ah, but no!—you cannot afford to chase me yet. I have to find more papers of baptisms and burials. Go then, we will talk of this affair as friends."

This friendly talk ended in Captain Paget's complete victory. M. Fleurus consented to accept

his costs out of pocket in the present, and three per cent of the heritage in the future. It was further agreed that the Captain should select the English attorney who should conduct M. Lenoble's case in the Court of Chancery.

This conversation occurred at Rouen, and a day or two afterwards the necessary document was drawn up. Gustave pledged himself to pay over a fourth share of the Haygarthian fortune to Horatio Paget, and three per cent upon the whole amount to Jean François Fleurus. The document was very formal, very complete; but whether such an agreement would hold water, if Gustave Lenoble should choose to contest it, was open to question.

The solicitor to whom Horatio Paget introduced M. Lenoble was a Mr. Dashwood, of the firm of Dashwood and Vernon; a man whom the Captain had known in the past, and from whom he had received good service in some of the most difficult crises of his difficult career. To this gentleman he confided the conduct of the case; and explained his apprehensions with regard to the two Sheldons.

"You see, as the case now stands, they think they have the claimant to this money in Miss Halliday—Sheldon's stepdaughter. But if they got an inkling of Susan Meynell's marriage—and, in point of fact, the actual state of the case—they might try to get hold of my friend, Gustave Lenoble. They could *not* get hold of him, mind you, Dashwood, but they would try it on, and I don't want trying on of that kind."

"Of course not. I know Sheldon, of Gray's Inn. He is rather—well, say *shady*. That's hardly an actionable epithet, and it expresses what I mean. Your friend's case seems to me tolerably clear. That little Frenchman is useful, but officious. It is not a speculative affair, I suppose? There is money to meet the current expenses of the business?"

"Yes, there is money. Within reasonable limits my friend is prepared to pay for the advancement of his claims."

After this the Haygarthian business progressed, slowly, quietly. The work was up to this point underground work. There were still

papers wanting—final links of the chain to be fitted together; and to the fitting of these links Messrs. Dashwood and Vernon devoted themselves, in conjunction with M. Fleurus.

This was how matters stood when Captain Paget drooped and languished, and was fain to abandon all active share in the struggle.

CHAPTER II.

FADING.

While the invalid in the pleasant lodgings overlooking Hyde Park grew day by day weaker, there was a change as marked in the bright young creature whose loving spirit had first brought the influence of affection to bear upon Diana Paget's character. Charlotte Halliday was ill—very ill. It was with everyday increasing anxiety that Diana watched the slow change—slow in its progress, but awfully rapid to look back upon. The pain, the regret, with which she noted her father's decay were little indeed compared with the sharp agony which rent her heart as she perceived the alteration in this dear friend, the blighting of this fair young flower.

That the withered leaves of autumn should fall is sad, but natural, and we submit to the gloomy

inevitable fact of decay and death. But to see our rose of roses, the pride and glory of the garden, fade and perish in its midsummer prime, is a calamity inexplicable and mysterious. Diana watched her father's decline with a sense of natural sorrow and pity; but there was neither surprise nor horror in the thought that for him the end of all things was drawing nigh. How different was it with Charlotte—with that happy soul for whom life and love wore their brightest smile, before whose light joyous footsteps stretched so fair a pathway!

The illness, whatever it was—and neither Mr. Sheldon nor the portly and venerable physician whom he called in could find a name for it—crept upon the patient with stealthy and insidious steps. Dizziness, trembling, faintness; trembling, faintness, dizziness: the symptoms alternated day by day. Sometimes there was a respite of a few days; and Charlotte—the youthful, the sanguine, the happy—declared that her enemy had left her.

"I am sure mamma is right, Di," she said on these occasions. "My nerves are the begin-

ning and end of the mischief; and if I could get the better of my nerves, I should be as well as ever. I don't wonder that the idea of my symptoms makes mamma almost cross. You see, she has been accustomed to have the symptoms all to herself; and for me to plagiarise them, as it were, must seem quite an impertinence. For a strong young thing like me, you know, Di dear —who have only just broken myself of plunging downstairs two and three steps at a time, and plunging upstairs in the same vulgar manner—to intrude on mamma's shattered nerves, and pirate mamma's low spirits, is utterly absurd and abominable; so I have resolved to look my nerves straight in the face, and get the better of them."

"My darling, you will get the better of them, if you try," said Diana, who did at times beguile herself with the hope that her friend's ailments were mental rather than bodily. "I daresay your monotonous life has something to do with your altered health; you want change of scene, dear."

"Change of scene, when I have you and Valentine! No, Di. It would certainly be very

nice to have the background shifted now and then; to see Capability Brown's prim gardens melt into Alpine heights or southern vineyards, or even into Russian steppes or Hungarian forests. One does get a little tired of *toujours* Bayswater; and Mr. Sheldon; and crimped skate; and sirloin of beef, and the inevitable discussion as to whether it is in a cannibal state of rawness or burnt to a cinder; and the glasses of pale sherry; and the red-worsted doyleys and blue finger-glasses; and the almonds and raisins, and crisp biscuits, that nobody ever eats; and the dreary, dreary funereal business of dinner, when we all talk vapid nonsense, with an ever-present consciousness of the parlour-maid. I am tired of the dull dinners, and of mamma's peevish complaints about Ann Woolper's ascendancy downstairs; and of Mr. Sheldon's perpetual newspapers, that crackle, crackle, crackle, all the evening through; and *such* papers!—*Money-Market Monitor*, *Stockholder's Vade-Mecum*, and all sorts of dreadful things of that kind, with not so much as an interesting advertisement in one of them. I used

never to feel these things an annoyance, you know, dear, till I made the acquaintance of my nerves; but from the moment I allowed my nerves to get the better of me, all these trifles have worried and excruciated me. But I am happy with you, darling; and I am happy with Valentine. Poor Valentine!"

She pronounced his name with a sigh; and then, after a pause, repeated mournfully, "Poor Valentine!"

"Why do you speak of him so sadly, dear?" asked Diana, very pale.

"Because—because we have planned such a happy life together, dear, and—"

"Is that a thing to be sad about, darling?"

"And—if it should happen, after all, that we have to part, and he go on alone, the world may seem so sad and lonely to him."

"Charlotte!" cried Diana, with a laugh that was almost choked by a sob, "is this looking your nerves in the face? Why, my dear one, this is indeed plagiarism of your mamma's low spirits. Lotta, you shall have change of air; yes, I am

determined on that. The stately physician who came in his carriage the other day, and who looked at your tongue and said 'Ah!' and then felt your pulse and said 'Ah!' again, and then called for pen-and-ink and wrote a little prescription, is not the doctor we want for you. We want Dr. Yorkshire; we want the breezes from the Yorkshire moors, and the smell of the farmyard, and our dear Aunt Dorothy's sillabubs, and our Uncle Joe to take us for long walks across his clover-fields."

"I don't want to go to Newhall, Di. I couldn't bear to leave—him."

"But what is to prevent your meeting *him* at the white gate this time, as you met him last October? Might not accident take *him* to Huxter's-cross again? The archæological work—of which we have heard no more, by the bye—might necessitate further investigations in that district. If you will go to Newhall, Lotta, I will pledge myself for Mr. Hawkehurst's speedy appearance at the white gate you have so often described to me."

"My dearest Di, you are all kindness; but even if I were inclined to go to Newhall, I doubt if mamma or Mr. Sheldon would like me to go."

"I am sure they would be pleased with any arrangement that was likely to benefit your health. But I will talk to your mamma about it. I have set my heart on your going to Newhall."

Miss Paget lost no time in carrying out her idea. She took possession of Georgy that afternoon, while teaching her a new stitch in *tricot*, and succeeded in impressing her with the conviction that change of air was necessary for Charlotte.

"But you don't think Lotta really ill?" asked Mrs. Sheldon nervously.

"I trust she is not really ill, dear Mrs. Sheldon; but I am sure she is much changed. In talking to her, I affect to think that her illness is only an affair of the nerves; but I sadly fear that it is something more than that."

"But what is the matter with her?" exclaimed Georgy, with a piteous air of perplexity;

"that is the question which I am always asking. People can't be ill, you know, Diana, without having something the matter with them; and that is what I can't make out in Charlotte's case. Mr. Sheldon says she wants tone; the physician who came in a carriage-and-pair, and ought to know what he is talking about, says there is a lack of vigour. But what does that all amount to? I'm sure I have wanted tone all my life. Perhaps there never was a creature so devoid of tone as I am; and the internal sinking I feel just before luncheon is something that no one but myself can realise. I daresay Lotta is not so strong as she might be; but I do not see that she can be ill, unless her illness is something definite. My poor first husband's illness, now, was the kind of thing that anyone could understand—bilious fever. The merest child knows what it is to be bilious, and the merest child knows what it is to be feverish. There can be nothing mysterious in bilious fever."

"But, dear Mrs. Sheldon," said Diana gravely, "don't you think that the weakness of constitu-

tion which rendered Charlotte's father liable to be taken off in the prime of life by a fever, is a weakness that Charlotte may possibly have inherited?"

"Good heavens, Diana!" cried Georgy, with sudden terror, "you don't mean to say that you think my Charlotte is going to die?"

It was but one step with Mrs. Sheldon from peevish incredulity to frantic alarm; and Diana found it as difficult to tranquillise her newly-awakened fears as it had been to rouse her from absolute apathy.

Change of air—yes, of course—Charlotte must have change of air that instant. Let a cab be sent for immediately to take them to the terminus. Change of air, of course. To Newhall—to Nice—to the Isle of Wight—to Malta; Mrs. Sheldon had heard of people going to Malta. Where should they go? Would Diana advise, and send for a cab, and pack a travelling-bag without an instant's delay? The rest of the things could be sent afterwards. What did luggage matter, when Charlotte's life was at stake?

At this point a flood of tears happily relieved poor Georgy's excited feelings, and then common sense and Diana Paget came to the rescue.

"My dear Mrs. Sheldon," she said, with a quiet cheerful tone that went far to reassure the excited lady, "in the first place, we must, above all things, refrain from any appearance of alarm. Her illness may, after all, be only an affair of the nerves; and there is certainly no cause for immediate fear."

Georgy was tranquillised, and agreed to take matters quietly. She promised to arrange Charlotte's departure for Newhall, with Mr. Sheldon, that evening.

"Of course, you know, my dear, I like to consult him about everything," she said apologetically. "It is a duty which one owes one's husband, you know, and a duty which, as a young woman about to marry, I cannot too much impress upon you. But in this case it is quite a matter of form; Mr. Sheldon never has objected to Charlotte's going to Newhall, and he is not likely to object now."

The event proved Mrs. Sheldon mistaken as to this matter. Georgy proposed the visit to Newhall that evening, while the two girls were strolling listlessly in the dusky garden, and Mr. Sheldon most decidedly rejected the proposition.

"If she wants change of air—and Dr. Doddleson recommended nothing of the kind—Newhall is not the place for her."

"Why not, dear?"

"It is too cold. Northerly aspect—no shelter—three hundred feet above York minster."

"But Dorothy Mercer is such a kind, motherly creature; she'd delight in nursing Lotta."

"Yes," answered Mr. Sheldon with a laugh, "and in quacking her. I know what those good motherly creatures are, when they get an excuse for dosing some unhappy victim with their quack nostrums. If Charlotte went to Newhall, Mrs. Mercer would poi—— would make her ten times worse than she is, with old woman's remedies. Besides, as I said before, the place is too cold. That is a conclusive argument, I suppose?"

He said this with some impatience of tone and

manner. There was a haggard look in his face, a hurried, harassed manner pervading him, this evening, which had been growing upon him of late. Georgy was too slow of perception to remark this; but Diana Paget had remarked it, and had attributed the change in the stockbroker's manner to a blending of two anxieties.

"He is anxious about money matters," she had said to herself, "and he is anxious about Charlotte's health. His lips, moving in whispered calculations as he sits brooding by the fire, tell me of the first anxiety; his eyes, wandering furtively to his stepdaughter's face, every now and then, tell me of the second."

This furtive anxiety of Mr. Sheldon's increased Diana Paget's anxiety. This man, who had a certain amount of medical knowledge, could no doubt read the diagnostics of that strange insidious illness, which had, as yet, no name. Diana, furtively watching his furtive looks, told herself that he read of danger.

"If Charlotte wants change of air, let her go to Hastings," he said; "that is the kind of place

for an invalid. I want rest myself; and there's such utter stagnation in the City nowadays that I can very well afford to give myself a holiday. We'll run down to Hastings—or the immediate neighbourhood of Hastings—for a week or two."

"O, Philip, how kind and considerate you are! I am sure, as I was observing to Miss Paget only to-day, you—"

"Ah, by the bye, there's Miss Paget. Is it absolutely necessary that Miss Paget should go to Hastings with us?"

"Well, dear, you see she has so kindly desired to remain with me for the quarter, so as to give me time to turn round, you know, with regard to caps and summer things, and so on—for, really, she has such taste, and does strike out such excellent ideas about turning, and dipping, and dyeing, that I don't know what will become of me when she leaves us; and it would look so pointed to—"

"Yes; she had better go with us. But why all this fuss about Charlotte? Who put it into your head that she wants change of air?"

Mr. Sheldon evidently considered it an esta-

blished fact that any idea in his wife's head must needs have been put there by someone or other.

"Well, you see, Diana and I were talking of Lotta this afternoon, and Diana quite alarmed me."

"How so?" asked Mr. Sheldon, with a quick frown.

"Why, she said it was evident, by the fact of poor dear Tom's dying of a fever, that his constitution must have been originally weak. And she said that perhaps Charlotte had inherited Tom's weak constitution, — and frightened me dreadfully."

"There is no occasion for you to be frightened; Charlotte will get on very well, I daresay, with care. But Miss Paget is a very sensible young woman, and is right in what she says. Charlotte's constitution is not strong."

"O, Philip!" said Georgy, in a faint wailing voice.

"I daresay she will live to follow you and me to our graves," said Mr. Sheldon with a hard laugh. "Ah, here she is."

Here she was, coming towards the open window, near which her stepfather sat. Here she was, pale and tired, with her sauntering walk, dressed in white, and spectral in the gloaming. To the sad eyes of her mother, she looked like a ghost. To the eyes of Philip Sheldon, a man not prone to poetic fancies, she looked even more ghost-like.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. WOOLPER IS ANXIOUS.

Since the beginning of her illness Charlotte Halliday had been the object and subject of many anxious thoughts in the minds of several people. That her stepfather had his anxieties about her—anxieties which he tried to hide—was obvious to the one person in the Bayswater Villa who noted his looks, and tried to read the thoughts they indicated.

Mrs. Sheldon's alarm, once fairly awakened, was not to be lulled to rest. And in Valentine Hawkehurst's heart there was an aching pain—a dull, dead load of care, which had never been lightened, from the hour when he first perceived the change in his dear one's face.

There was one other person, an inhabitant of the Bayswater Villa, who watched Charlotte Hal-

liday at this time with a care as unresting as the care of mother or stepfather, bosom friend or plighted lover. This person was Ann Woolper. Mrs. Woolper had come to the Villa prepared to find in Miss Halliday a frivolous, self-satisfied young person, between whom and an old broken-down woman like herself there could be no sympathy. She had expected to be contemptuously—or, at the best, indifferently — entreated by the prosperous, well-placed young lady, whom Mr. Sheldon had spoken of as a good girl, as girls go; a vague species of commendation, which to the mind of Mrs. Woolper promised very little.

As clearly as Philip Sheldon dared express his wishes with regard to Charlotte Halliday, he had expressed them to Ann Woolper. What he would fain have said was, "Watch my step-daughter, and keep me well acquainted with every step she takes." This much he dared not say; but by insinuating that Tom Halliday's daughter was frivolous and reckless, and that her lover was not to be trusted, he had contrived to put Mrs. Woolper on the *qui vive*.

"Mr. Philip's afraid she may go and marry this young man on the sly, before he's got the means to support a wife," she said to herself, as she meditated upon the meaning of her master's injunctions; "and well he may be. There's no knowing what young women are up to nowadays; and the more innocent and inexperienced a young woman is, the more she wants looking after. And Miss Georgy Craddock always was a poor fondy, up to nought but dressing herself fine, and streaming up and down Barlingford High-street with her old schoolfellows. Such as she ain't fit to be trusted with a daughter; and Mr. Philip knows that. He always was a deep one. But I'm glad he looks after Missy; there's many men, having got fast hold of th' father's brass, would let th' daughter marry Old Scratch, for the sake of gettin' rid of her."

This is how Mrs. Woolper argued the matter. She came of a prudent race; and anything like prudence seemed to her a commendable virtue. She wished to think well of her master; for her he had been a Providence in the hour of calamity

and old age. Where else could she look, if not to him? And to suspect him, or think ill of him, was to reject the one refuge offered to her distress. A magnanimous independence of spirit is not an easy virtue for the old and friendless and poor. The drowning wretch will scarcely question the soundness of the plank that sustains him upon the storm-tossed billows; nor was Mrs. Woolper inclined to question the motives of the man to whom she now owed her daily bread.

It is possible that before invoking Mrs. Woolper from the ashes of the past to take her seat by the hearthstone of the present, Mr. Sheldon may have contemplated the question of her return in all its bearings, and may have assured himself that she was his own, by a tie not easily broken: his bond-slave, fettered hand and foot by the bondage of necessity.

"What choice can she have, except the choice between my house and the workhouse?" he may naturally have asked himself; "and is it likely she will quarrel with her bread-and-butter in order to fall back upon dry bread?" Mr. Sheldon, con-

templating this, and all other questions, from his one unchanging stand-point, may reasonably have concluded that Mrs. Woolper would do nothing opposed to her own interests; and that so long as it suited her interest to remain at the Lawn, and to serve him, she would there remain, his docile and unquestioning slave.

The influence of affection, the force of generous impulse, were qualities that did not come into Mr. Sheldon's calculations upon this subject. His addition and subtraction, division and multiplication, were all based on one system.

That happy and unconscious art by which Charlotte Halliday made herself dear to all who knew her, had a speedy effect upon the old housekeeper. The girl's amiable consideration for her age and infirmities; the pretty affectionate familiarity with which she treated this countrywoman, who had known her father, and who could talk to her of Yorkshire and Yorkshire people, soon made their way to Nancy Woolper's heart of hearts. For Miss Halliday to come to the housekeeper's room with some message from her mo-

ther, and to linger for a few minutes' chat, was a delight to Mrs. Woolper. She would have detained the bright young visitant for hours instead of minutes, if she could have found any excuse for so doing. Nor was there any treason against Mr. Sheldon in her growing attachment to his step-daughter. Whenever Nancy spoke of that master and benefactor, she spoke with unfeigned gratitude and affection.

"I nursed your step-papa as a baby, Miss Halliday," she said very often on these occasions. "You wouldn't think, to look at him now, that he ever was *that*, would you? But he was one of the finest babies you could wish to see—tall, and strong, and with eyes that pierced one through, they were so bright and big and black. He was rather stubborn-spirited with his teething; but what baby isn't trying at such times? I had rare work with him, I can tell you, Miss, walking him about of nights, and jogging him till there wasn't a jog left in me, as you may say, from sleepiness. I often wonder if he thinks of this now, when I see him looking so grave and stern. But, you see,

being jogged doesn't impress the mind like having to jog; and though I can bring that time back as plain as if it was yesterday, with the very nursery I slept in at Barlingford, and the rushlight in a tall iron cage on the floor, and the shadow of the cage on the bare whitewashed walls—it's clean gone out of his mind, I daresay."

"I'm afraid it has, Nancy."

"But, O, I was fond of him, Miss Halliday; and what I went through with him about his teeth made me only the fonder of him. He was the first baby I ever nursed, you see, and the last; for before Master George came to town I'd taken to the cooking, and Mrs. Sheldon hired another girl as nurse; a regular softy *she* was, and it isn't her fault that Master George has got anything christian-like in the way of a back, for the way she carried that blessed child used to make my blood run cold."

Thus would Mrs. Woolper discourse, whenever she had a fair excuse for detaining Miss Halliday in her comfortable apartment. Charlotte did not perceive much interest in these reminiscences of

Mr. Sheldon's infancy, but she was much too kind to bring them abruptly to a close by any show of impatience. When she could get Nancy to talk of Barlingford and Hyley, and the people whom Charlotte herself had known as a child, the conversation was really interesting; and these recollections formed a link between the old woman and the fair young damsel.

When the change arose in Charlotte's health and spirits, Mrs. Woolper was one of the first to perceive it. She was skilled in those old-woman's remedies which Mr. Sheldon held in such supreme contempt, and she would fain have dosed the invalid with nauseous decoctions of hops, or home-brewed quinine. Charlotte appreciated the kindness of the intent, but she rebelled against the home-brewed medicines; and pinned her faith to the more scientific and less obnoxious preparations procured from the chemist's.

For some time Nancy made light of the girl's ailments, though she watched her with unfailing attention.

"You ain't a-done growing yet, miss, I'll lay," she said.

"But I'm more than twenty-one, Nancy. People don't grow after they're of age, do they?"

"I've known them as have, miss; I don't say it's common, but it has been done. And then there's the weakness that comes after you've done growing. Girls of your age are apt to be faint, and lollopy-like, as you may say; especially when they're stived up in a smoky place like London. You ought to go to Hyley, miss, where you was born; that's the place to set you up."

The time had come when the change was no longer matter for doubt. Day by day Charlotte grew weaker and paler; day by day that bright and joyous creature, whose presence had made an atmosphere of youth and gladness even in that prim dwelling-place, receded further into the dimness of the past; until to think of what she had been, seemed like recalling the image of the dead. Nancy marked the alteration with a strange pain, so sharp, so bitter, that its sharpness and bitterness were a perpetual perplexity to her.

"If the poor dear young thing is meant to go, there's no need for *me* to fret about it all day long, and wake up sudden in the night with cold water standing out upon my forehead at the thought of it. I haven't known her six months; and if she is pretty and sweet-spoken, it's not my place to give way at the thoughts of losing her. She's not my own flesh and blood; and I've sat by to watch *them* go, times and often, without feeling as I do when I see the change in her, day after day. Why should it seem so dreadful to me?"

Why indeed? This was a question for which Mrs. Woolper could find no answer. She knew that the pain and horror which she felt were something more than natural, but beyond this point her thoughts refused to travel. A superstitious feeling arose at this point, to usurp the office of reason, and she accounted for the strangeness of Miss Halliday's illness as she might have done had she lived in the sixteenth century, and been liable to the suspicion of nocturnal careerings on broomsticks.

"I'm sorry Mr. Philip's house should be un-

lucky to that sweet young creature," she said to herself. "It was unlucky to the father; and now it seems as if it was going to be unlucky to the daughter. And Mr. Philip won't be any richer for her death. Mrs. Sheldon has told me times and often that all Tom Halliday's money went to my master when she married him, and he has doubled and trebled it by his cleverness. Miss Charlotte's death wouldn't bring him a sixpence."

This was the gist of Mrs. Woolper's meditations very often nowadays. But the strange sense of perplexity, the nameless fear, the vague horror, were not to be banished from her mind. A sense of some shapeless presence for ever at her side haunted her by day and night. What was it? What did its presence portend? It was as if a figure, shrouded from head to foot, was there, dark and terrible, at her elbow, and she would not turn to meet the horror face to face. Sometimes the phantom-hand lifted a corner of the veil, and the shade said, "Look at me! See who and what I am! You have seen me before. I am here again! and this time you shall not refuse to

meet me face to face! I am the shadow of the horror you suspected in the past!"

The shadowy fears which oppressed Mrs. Woolper during this period did not in any way lessen her practical usefulness. From the commencement of Charlotte's slow decline she had shown herself attentive, and even officious, in all matters relating to the invalid. With her own hands she decanted the famous port which Georgy fetched from the particular bin in Mr. Sheldon's carefully-arranged cellar. When the physician was called in, and wrote his harmless little prescription, it was Mrs. Woolper who carried the document to the dispensing chemist, and brought back the innocent potion, which might, peradventure, effect some slight good, and was too feeble a decoction to do any harm. Charlotte duly appreciated all this kindness; but she repeatedly assured the housekeeper that her ailments were not worthy of so much care.

It was Mrs. Woolper whom Mr. Sheldon employed to get lodgings for the family, when it had

been ultimately decided that a change to the sea-side was the best cure for Miss Halliday.

"I am too busy to go to Hastings myself this week," he said; "but I shall be prepared to spend a fortnight there after next Monday. What I want you to do, Nancy, is to slip down to-morrow with a second-class return-ticket and look about for a nice place for us. I don't care about being in Hastings; there's too much cockneyism in the place at this time of year. There's a little village called Harold's-hill, within a mile or so of St. Leonard's,—a dull, out-of-the-way place, but rustic and picturesque, and all that kind of thing,—the sort of place that women like. Now, I'd rather stay at that place than at Hastings. So you can take a fly at the station, drive straight to Harold's-hill, and secure the best lodgings you can get."

"You think as the change of air will do Miss Halliday good?" asked Mrs. Woolper anxiously, after she had promised to do all her kind master required of her.

"Do I think it will do her good? Of course

I do. Sea-air and sea-bathing will set her up in no time; there's nothing particular the matter with her."

"No, Mr. Philip; that's what bothers me about the whole thing. There's nothing particular the matter with her; and yet she pines and dwindles, and dwindles and pines, till it makes one's heart ache to see her."

Philip Sheldon's face darkened, and he threw himself back in his chair with an impatient movement. If he had chosen to do so, he could have prevented that darkening of his face; but he did not consider Mrs. Woolper a person of sufficient importance to necessitate the regulation of his countenance. What was she but an ignorant, obstinate old woman, who would most probably perish in the streets if he chose to turn her out of doors? There are men who consider their clerks and retainers such very dirt, that they would continue the forging of a bill of exchange, or complete the final touches of a murder, with a junior clerk putting coals on the fire, or an errand-boy standing cap in hand on the

threshold of the door. They cannot realise the fact, that dirt such as this is flesh and blood, and may denounce them by and by in a witness-box.

Of all contingencies Mr. Sheldon least expected that this old woman could prove troublesome to him—this abject wretch, whose daily bread depended on his will. He could not imagine that there are circumstances under which such abject creatures will renounce their daily bread, and die of hunger, rather than accept the means of life from one hateful hand.

"If you want to know anything about Miss Halliday's illness," he said in his hardest voice, and with his hardest look, "you had better apply to Dr. Doddleson, the physician who has prescribed for her. I do not attend her, you see, and I am in no way responsible for her health. When I was attending her father you favoured me by doubting my skill, if I judged rightly as to your tone and manner on one occasion. I don't want to be brought to book by you, Mrs. Woolper, about Miss Halliday's altered looks or

Miss Halliday's illness; I have nothing to do with either."

"How should I think you had, sir? Don't be angry with me, or hard upon me, Mr. Phil. I nursed you when you was but a baby, and you're nearer and dearer to me than any other master could be. Why, I have but to shut my eyes now, and I can feel your little hand upon my neck, as it used to lie there, so soft and dear. And then I look down at the hand on the table, strong and dark, and clenched so firm, and I ask myself, Can it be the same? For the sake of that time, Mr. Phil, don't be hard upon me. There's nothing I wouldn't do to serve you; there's nothing you could do that would turn me from you. There's no man living in this world, sir, that oughtn't to be glad to know of one person that nothing can turn from him."

"That's a very fine sentiment, my good soul," replied Mr. Sheldon coolly; "but, you see, it's only an *ex-parte* statement; and as the case stands, there is no opportunity for the display of those fine feelings you talk about. You happen to want

a home in your old age, and I happen to be able to give you a home. Under such circumstances, your own good sense will show you that all sentimental talk about standing by *me*, and not turning away from me, is absolute bosh."

The old woman sighed heavily. She had offered her master a fidelity which involved the abnegation of all impulses of her own heart and mind, and he rejected her love and her service. And then, after the first dreary sense of his coldness, she felt better pleased that it should be so. The man who spoke to her in this harsh, uncompromising way could have no cause to fear her. In the mind of such a man there could surely be no secret chamber within which she had, with his knowledge, almost penetrated.

"I won't trouble you any more, sir," she said mournfully. "I daresay I'm a foolish old woman."

"You are, Nancy. We don't get wiser as we grow older, you see; and when we let our tongues wag, we're apt to talk nonsense. The quieter you keep your tongue, the better for yourself, in more

ways than one. To a useful old woman about the place I've no objection; but a chattering old woman I will not have at any price."

After this, everything was settled in the most agreeable manner. Nancy Woolper's journey to Hastings was fully arranged; and early the next morning she started, brisk and active, in spite of her sixty-eight years of age. She returned at night, having secured very pleasant lodgings at the village of Harold's-hill.

"And a very sweet place it is, my dear Miss Lotta," she said to Charlotte the next day, when she described her adventures. "The apartments are at a farmhouse overlooking the sea; and the smell of the cows under your windows, and the sea-breezes blowing across the farmyard, can't fail to bring the colour back to your pretty cheeks, and the brightness back to your pretty eyes."

CHAPTER IV.

VALENTINE'S SKELETON.

The idea of this visit to the Sussex village by the sea seemed delightful to everyone except Gustave Lenoble, who was still in town, and who thought it a hard thing that he should be deprived of Diana's society during an entire fortnight, for the sake of this sickly Miss Halliday.

For the rest, there was hope and gladness in the thought of this change of dwelling. Charlotte languished for fresher breezes and more rustic prospects than the breezes and prospects of Bayswater; Diana looked to the sea-air as the doctor of doctors for her fading friend; and Valentine cherished the same hope.

On Valentine Hawkehurst the burden of an unlooked-for sorrow had weighed very heavily. To

see this dear girl, who was the beginning, middle, and end of all his hopes, slowly fading before his eyes, was of all agonies that could have fallen to his lot the sharpest and most bitter. Not Ugolino sitting silent amidst his famishing children—not Helen, when she would fain that the tempest had swept her from earth's surface on that evil day when she was born—not Penelope, when she cried on Diana, the high-priestess of death, to release her from the weariness of her days—not Agamemnon, when the fatal edict had gone forth, and his fair young daughter looked into his face, and asked him if it was true that she was to die—not one of these typical mourners could have suffered a keener torture than that which rent this young man's heart, as he marked the stealthy steps of the Destroyer drawing nearer and nearer the woman he loved. Of all possible calamities, this was the last he had ever contemplated. Sometimes, in moments of doubt or despondency, he had thought it possible that poverty, the advice of friends, caprice or inconstancy on the part of Charlotte herself, should sever them. But among the possible

enemies to his happiness he had never counted Death. What had Death to do with so fair and happy a creature as Charlotte Halliday? she who, until some two months before this time, might have been the divine Hygieia in person—so fresh was her youthful bloom, so buoyant her step, so bright her glances. Valentine's hardest penance was the necessity for the concealment of his anxiety. The idea that Charlotte's illness might be—nay must be—for the greater part an affair of the nerves, was always paramount in his mind. He and Diana had talked of the subject together whenever they found an opportunity for so doing, and had comforted themselves with the assurance that the nerves alone were to blame; and they were the more inclined to think this from the conduct of Dr. Doddleson, on that physician's visits to Miss Halliday. Mrs. Sheldon had been present on each occasion, and to Mrs. Sheldon alone had the physician given utterance to his opinion of the case. That opinion, though expressed with a certain amount of professional dignity, amounted to very little. "Our dear young

friend wanted strength; and what we had to do was to give our dear young friend strength—vital power. Yes—er—um, that was the chief point. And what kind of diet might our dear young friend take now? Was it a light diet, a little roast-mutton—not too much done, but not underdone? O dear, no. And a light pudding? what he would call—if he might be permitted to have his little joke—a nursery pudding." And then the old gentleman had indulged in a senile chuckle, and patted Charlotte's head with his fat old fingers. "And our dear young friend's room, now, was it a large room?—good! and what was the aspect now, south?—good again! nothing better, unless perhaps, southwest — but, of course, everyone's rooms can't look southwest. A little tonic draught, and gentle daily exercise in that nice garden, will set our dear young friend right again. Our temperament is nervous, we are a sensitive plant, and want care." And then the respectable septuagenarian took his fee, and shuffled off to his carriage. And this was all that Mrs. Sheldon could tell Diana, or Nancy Woolper, both of whom ques-

tioned her closely about her interview with the doctor. To Diana and to Valentine there was hope to be gathered from the very vagueness of the physician's opinion. If there had been anything serious the matter, the medical adviser must needs have spoken more seriously. He came again and again. He found the pulse a little weaker, the patient a little more nervous, with a slight tendency to hysteria, and so on; but he still declared that there were no traces of organic disease, and he still talked of Miss Halliday's ailments with a cheery, easy-going manner that was very reassuring.

In his moments of depression Valentine pinned his faith upon Dr. Doddleson. Without organic disease, he told himself, his darling could not perish. He looked for Dr. Doddleson's name in the directory, and took comfort from the fact of that physician's residence in a fashionable West-end square. He took further comfort from the splendour of the doctor's equipage, as depicted to him by Mrs. Sheldon; and from the doctor's age and experience, as copiously described by the same lady.

"There is only one fact that I have ever reproached myself with in relation to my poor Tom," said Georgy, who, in talking to strangers of her first husband, was apt to impress them with the idea that she was talking of a favourite cat; "and that is, the youthfulness of the doctor Mr. Sheldon employed. Of course, I am well aware that Mr. Sheldon would not have consulted the young man if he had not thought him clever; but I could lay my head upon my pillow at night with a clearer conscience, if poor Tom's doctor had been an older and more experienced person. Now, that's what I like about Dr. Doddleson. There's a gravity—a weight—about a man of that age which inspires one with immediate confidence. I'm sure the serious manner with which he questioned me about Lotta's diet, and the aspect of her room, was quite delightful."

In Dr. Doddleson, under Providence, Valentine was fain to put his trust. He did not know that the worthy doctor was one of those harmless inanities who, by the aid of money and powerful connexions, are sometimes forced into a position

which nature never intended them to occupy. Among the real working-men of that great and admirable brotherhood, the medical profession, Dr. Doddleson had no rank; but he was the pet physician of fashionable dowagers suffering from chronic laziness or periodical attacks of ill-humour. For the spleen or the vapours no one was a better adviser than Dr. Doddleson. He could afford to waste half an hour upon the asking of questions which the fair patient's maid might as well have asked, and the suggestion of remedies which any intelligent abigail could as easily have suggested. Elderly ladies believed in him because he was pompous and ponderous, lived in an expensive neighbourhood, and drove a handsome equipage. He wore mourning-rings left him by patients who never had had anything particular the matter with them, and who, dying of sheer old age or sheer over-eating, declared with their final gasp that Dr. Doddleson had been the guardian-angel of their frail lives during the last twenty years.

This was the man who, of all the medical profession resident in London, Mr. Sheldon had

selected as his stepdaughter's adviser in a case so beyond common experience, that a man of wide practice and keen perception was especially needed for its treatment.

Dr. Doddleson, accustomed to attribute the fancied ailments of fashionable dowagers to want of tone, and accustomed to prescribe the mildest preparations with satisfaction to his patients and profit to himself, dwelt upon the same want of tone, and prescribed the same harmless remedies, in his treatment of Charlotte Halliday. When he found her no better—nay, even worse—after some weeks of this treatment, he was puzzled; and for one harmless remedy he substituted another harmless remedy, and waited another week to see what effect the second harmless remedy might have on this somewhat obstinate young person.

And this was the broken reed to which Valentine clung in the day of his trouble.

Bitter were his days and sleepless were his nights in this dark period of his existence. He went to the Bayswater Villa nearly every day now. It was no longer time for etiquette or

ceremony. His darling was fading day by day; and it was his right to watch the slow sad change, and, if it were possible, to keep the enemy at arm's-length. Every day he came to spend one too brief hour with his dear love; every day he greeted her with the same fond smile, and beguiled her with the same hopeful talk. He brought her new books and flowers, and any foolish trifle which he fancied might beguile her thoughts from the contemplation of that mysterious malady which seemed beyond the reach of science and Dr. Doddleson. He sat and talked with her of the future—that future which in their secret thoughts both held to be a sweet, sad fable—the hyperborean garden of their dreams. And after spending this too sweet, too bitter hour with his beloved, Mr. Hawkehurst would diplomatise in order to have a little talk with Diana, as he left the house. Did Diana think his dear girl better to-day, or worse—surely not worse? He had fancied she had more colour, more of her old gaiety of manner. She had seemed a little feverish; but that might be the excitement of

his visit. And so on, and so on, with sad and dreary repetition.

And then, having gone away from that house with an aching heart, the young magazine-writer went back to his lodgings, and plunged into the dashing essay or the smart pleasant story which was to constitute his monthly contribution to the *Cheapside* or the *Charing Cross*. Gaiety, movement, rollicking, Harry-Lorrequer-like spirits were demanded for the *Cheapside;* a graceful union of brilliancy and depth was required for the *Charing Cross*. And, O, be sure the critics lay in wait to catch the young scribbler tripping! An anachronism here, a secondhand idea there, and the *West-end Wasp* shrieked its war-whoop in an occasional note; or the *Minerva* published a letter from a correspondent in the Scilly Islands, headed "Another Literary Jack Sheppard," to say that in his *Imperial Dictionary* he had discovered with profound indignation a whole column of words feloniously and mendaciously appropriated by the writer of such-and-such an article in the *Cheapside*. While the sunlight of hope had

shone upon him, Mr. Hawkehurst had found the hardest work pleasant. Was he not working for *her* sake? Did not his future union with that dear girl depend upon his present industry? It had seemed to him as if she stood at his elbow while he wrote, as Pallas stood beside Achilles at the council, invisible to all but her favourite. It was that mystic presence which lent swiftness to his pen. When he was tired and depressed, the thought of Charlotte had revived his courage and vanquished his fatigue. Pleasant images crowded upon him when he thought of her. What could be easier than for him to write a love-story? He had but to create a shadowy Charlotte for his heroine; and the stream of foolish lover's babble flowed from his pen perennial and inexhaustible. To his reading she lent a charm and a grace that made the most perfect poetry still more poetical. It was not Achilles and Helen who met on Mount Ida, but Valentine and Charlotte; it was not Paolo and Francesca who read the fatal book together, but Valentine and Charlotte, in an unregenerate and mediæval

state of mind. The mere coincidence of a name made the *Sorrows of Werter* delightful. The all-pervading presence was everywhere and in everything. His religion was not Pantheism, but Charlottism.

Now all was changed. A brooding care was with him in every moment. The mystic presence was still close to him in every hour of his lonely days and nights; but that image, which had been fair and blooming as the incarnation of youth and spring-time, was now a pale shrouded phantom which he dared not contemplate. He still wrote on—for it is marvellous how the pen will travel and the mind will project itself into the shadow-world of fancy, while cankerous care gnaws the weary heart. Nay, it is perhaps at these times that the imagination is most active; for the world of shadows is a kind of refuge for the mind that dare not dwell upon realities. Who can say what dull, leaden care may have weighed down the heart of William Shakespeare when his mind conceived that monster of a poet's grand imaginings, Othello! There is the flavour of racking care

in that mighty creation. The strong soul wantonly tortured by a sordid wretch; the noble spirit distraught, the honourable life wrecked for so poor a motive; that sense of the "something in this world amiss," which the poet of all other creatures feels most keenly.

With grief and fear as his constant companions, Valentine Hawkehurst toiled on bravely, patiently. Hope had not deserted him; but between hope and fear the contest was unceasing. Sometimes hope had the best of it for a while, and the toiler comforted himself with the thought that this dark cloud would pass anon from the horizon of his life; and then he counted his gains, and found that the fruit of his labours was increasing monthly, as his name gained rank among the band of young *littérateurs*. The day when he might count upon that income which Mr. Sheldon demanded as his qualification for matrimony did not appear far distant. Given a certain amount of natural ability, and the industrious and indefatigable young writer may speedily emerge from obscurity, and take his place in the great army

of those gallant soldiers whose only weapon is the pen. Whatever good fortune had come to Valentine Hawkehurst he had worked for with all honesty of purpose. The critics were not slow to remark that he worked at a white-hot haste, and must needs be a shallow pretender, because he was laborious and indefatigable.

Before the beginning of Charlotte's slow decline he had fancied himself the happiest of men. There were more deposit-receipts in his desk. The nest-egg, about the hatching whereof there had been such cackling and crowing some months ago, was now one of many eggs; for the hard-working scribbler had no leisure in which to be extravagant, had he been so minded. The purchase of a half-circlet of diamonds for his betrothed's slim finger had been his only folly.

Charlotte had remonstrated with him on the impropriety of such an extravagance, and had exacted from him a promise that this wild and Monte-Christo-like course should be pursued no further; but she was very proud of her half-hoop

of diamonds nevertheless, and was wont to press it tenderly to her lips before she laid it aside for the night.

"There must be no more such extravagance, sir," she said to her lover, when he sat by her side twisting the ring round and round on her pretty finger. Alas, how loose the ring had become since it had first been placed there!

"Consider the future, Valentine," continued the girl, hopeful of mood while her hand rested in his. "Do you suppose we can furnish our cottage at Wimbledon if we rush into such wild expenses as diamond rings? Do you know that *I* am saving money, Valentine? Yes, positively. Papa gives me a very good allowance for my dresses, and bonnets, and things, you know, and I used to be extravagant and spend it all. But now I have become the most miserly creature; and I have a little packet of money upstairs which you shall put in the Unitas Bank with the rest of your wealth. Diana and I have been darning, and patching, and cutting, and contriving, in the most praiseworthy manner. Even this silk has

been turned. You did not think that, did you, when you admired it so?"

Mr. Hawkehurst looked at his beloved with a tender smile. The exact significance of the operation of turning, as applied to silk dresses, was somewhat beyond his comprehension; but he felt sure that to turn must be a laudable action, else why that air of pride with which Charlotte informed him of the fact?

CHAPTER V.

AT HAROLD'S-HILL.

The summer sun shone upon the village of Harold's-hill when Charlotte arrived there with Mrs. Sheldon and Diana Paget. Mr. Sheldon was to follow them on the same day by a later train; and Valentine was to come two days afterwards to spend the peaceful interval between Saturday and Monday with his betrothed. He had seen the travellers depart from the London-Bridge terminus, but Mr. Sheldon had been there also, and there had been no opportunity for confidential communication between the lovers.

Of all Sussex villages Harold's-hill is perhaps the prettiest. The gray old Saxon church, the scattered farmhouses and pleasant rustic cottages, are built on the slope of a hill, and all the width of ocean lies below the rustic windows. The

roses and fuchsias of the cottage gardens seem all the brighter by contrast with that broad expanse of blue. The fresh breath of the salt sea blends with the perfume of new-mown hay and all the homely odours of the farmyard. The lark sings high in the blue vault of heaven above the church, and over the blue of the sea the gull skims white in the sunshine. The fisherman and the farm labourer have their cottages side by side, nestling cosily to leeward of the hilly winding road.

This hilly winding road in the July afternoon seemed to Charlotte almost like the way to Paradise.

"It is like going to heaven, Di!" she cried, with her eyes fixed on the square tower of the old gray church. She wondered why sudden tears sprang to Diana's eyes as she said this. Miss Paget brushed the unbidden tears away with a quick gesture of her hand, and smiled at her friend.

"Yes, dear, the village is very pretty, isn't it?"

"It looks awfully dull!" said Mrs. Sheldon with a shudder; "and, Diana, I declare there isn't a single shop. *Where* are we to get our provisions? I told Mr. Sheldon St. Leonard's would have been a better place for us."

"O, mamma, St. Leonard's is the very essence of all that is tame and commonplace, compared to this darling rural village! Look, do look, at that fisherman's cottage, with the nets hanging out to dry in the sunshine; just like a picture of Hook's!"

"What's the use of going on about fishermen's cottages, Lotta?" Mrs. Sheldon demanded peevishly. "Fishermen's cottages won't provide us with butcher's meat. Where are we to get your little bit of roast mutton? Dr. Doddleson laid such a stress upon the roast mutton."

"The sea-air will do me more good than all the mutton that ever was roasted at Eton, mamma. O, dear, is this *our* farmhouse?" cried Charlotte, as the vehicle drew up at a picturesque gate. "O, what a love of a house! what diamond-paned windows! what sweet white cur-

tains! and a cow staring at me quite in the friendliest way across the gate! O, can we be so happy as to live here?"

"Diana," cried Mrs. Sheldon in a solemn voice, "not a single shop have we passed—not so much as a post-office! And as to haberdashery, I'm sure you might be reduced to rags in this place before you could get so much as a yard of glazed lining!"

The farmhouse was one of those ideal homesteads, which, to the dweller in cities, seems fair as the sapphire-ceiled chambers of the house of Solomon. Charlotte was enraptured by the idea that this was to be her home for the next fortnight.

"I wish it could be for ever, Di," she said, as the two girls were inspecting the rustic, dimity-draperied, lavender-and-rose-leaf-perfumed bedchambers. "Who would wish to go back to prim suburban Bayswater after this? Valentine and I could lodge here after our marriage. It is better than Wimbledon. Grand thoughts would come to him with the thunder of the stormy

waves; and on calm bright days like this the rippling water would whisper pretty fancies into his ear. Why, to live here would make anyone a poet. I think I could write a novel myself, if I lived here long enough."

After this they arranged the pretty sitting-room, and placed an easy-chair by the window for Charlotte, an arm-chair opposite this for Mrs. Sheldon, and between the two a little table for the fancy-work and books and flowers, and all the small necessities of feminine existence. And then—while Mrs. Sheldon prowled about the rooms, and discovered so many faults and made so many objections as to give evidence of a fine faculty for invention unsuspected in her hitherto—Charlotte and Diana explored the garden and peeped at the farmyard, where the friendly cow still stared over the white gate, just as she had stared when the fly came to a stop, as if she had not yet recovered from the astonishment created in her pastoral mind by that phenomenal circumstance. And then Charlotte was suddenly tired, and there came upon her that strange dizziness which was

one of her most frequent symptoms. Diana led her immediately back to the house, and established her comfortably in her easy-chair.

"I must be very ill," she said plaintively; "for even the novelty of this pretty place cannot make me happy long."

Mr. Sheldon arrived in the evening, bringing with him a supply of that simple medicine which Charlotte took three times a day. He had remembered that there was no dispensing-chemist at Harold's-hill, and that it would be necessary to send to St. Leonards for the medicine, and had therefore brought with him a double quantity of the mild tonic.

"It was very kind of you to think of it, though I really don't believe the stuff does me any good," said Charlotte. "Nancy Woolper used to get it for me at Bayswater. She made quite a point of fetching it from the chemist's herself."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Sheldon. "Nancy troubled herself about your medicine, did she?"

"Yes, papa; and about me altogether. If I were her own daughter, she could scarcely have seemed more anxious."

The stockbroker made a mental note of this in the memorandum-book of his brain. Mrs. Woolper was officious, was she, and suspicious?—altogether a troublesome sort of person.

"I think a few weeks of workhouse fare would be wholesome for that old lady," he said to himself. "There are some people who never know when they are well off."

Saturday afternoon came in due course, after a long and dreary interval, as it seemed to Charlotte, for whom time travelled very slowly, so painful was the weariness of illness. Now and then a sudden flash of excitement brought the old brightness to her face, the old gaiety to her accents; but the brightness faded very soon, and the languor of illness was very perceptible.

Punctual to the hour at which he was expected, Mr. Hawkehurst appeared, in radiant spirits, laden with new magazines, delighted with the village, en-

raptured with the garden, enchanted with the sea: full of talk and animation, with all sorts of news to tell his beloved. Such and such a book was a failure, such and such a comedy was a fiasco; Jones's novel had made a hit; Brown's picture was the talk of the year; and Charlotte must see the picture that had been talked about, and the play that had been condemned, when she returned to town.

For an hour the lovers sat in the pretty farmhouse parlour talking together thus, the summer sea and the garden flowers before them, and a bird singing high in the calm blue heaven. Charlotte's talk was somewhat languid, though it was perfect happiness for her to be seated thus, with her betrothed by her side; but Valentine's gaiety of spirits never flagged; and when Mrs. Sheldon hinted to him that too long a conversation might fatigue the dear invalid, he left the parlour with a smile upon his face, and a cheery promise to return after an hour's ramble.

He did not ramble far. He went straight to a little wooden summer-house in the remotest

corner of the humble garden; and thither Diana Paget followed him. She had learned the language of his face in the time of their daily companionship, and she had seen a look as he left the house which told her of the struggle his cheerfulness had cost him.

"You must not be downhearted, Valentine," she said as she went into the summer-house, where he sat in a listless attitude, with his arms lying loosely folded on the rustic table.

He did not answer her.

"You don't think her worse—much worse—do you, Valentine?"

"Worse? I have seen death in her face today!" he cried; and then he let his forehead fall upon his folded arms, and sobbed aloud.

Diana stood by his side watching that outburst of grief. When the passionate storm of tears was past, she comforted him, as best she might. The change so visible to him was not so plain to her. He had hoped that the breath of the ocean would have magical power to restore the invalid. He had come to Harold's-hill full of

hope, and instead of the beginning of an improvement he saw the progress of decay.

"Why did not Sheldon send for the doctor," he asked indignantly, "the physician who has attended her? He might have telegraphed to that man."

"Charlotte is taking Dr. Doddleson's medicine," said Diana, "and all his directions are most carefully obeyed."

"What of that, if she grows worse? The doctor should see her daily, hourly, if necessary. And if he cannot cure her, another doctor should be sent for. Good heavens, Diana! are we to let her fade and sink from us before our eyes? I will go back to London at once, and bring that man Doddleson down by the night-mail."

"Your going back to London would grieve and alarm Charlotte. You can telegraph for the doctor; or, at least, Mr. Sheldon can do so. It would not do for you to interfere without his permission."

"It would not do!" echoed Valentine angrily. "Do you think that I am going to stand upon

punctilio, or to consider what will do or will not do?"

"Above all things, you must avoid alarming Charlotte," pleaded Diana.

"Do you think I do not know that? Do you think I did not feel that just now, when I sat by her side, talking inane rubbish about books and plays and pictures, while every stolen glance at my darling's face was like a dagger thrust into my heart? I will not alarm her. I will consult Mr. Sheldon—will do anything, everything, to save her. To save her! O, my God, has it come to that?"

He grew a little calmer presently under Diana's influence, and went slowly back to the house. He avoided the open window by which Charlotte was sitting. He had not yet schooled himself to meet her questioning looks. He went to the room where they were to dine, a duller and darker apartment than the parlour, and here he found Mr. Sheldon reading a paper, one of the eternal records of the eternal money-market.

The stockbroker had been in and out of the

house all day, now sauntering by the sea-shore, now leaning moodily, with folded arms, on the garden-gate, meditative and silent as the cow that stared at Charlotte; now pacing the garden-walks, with his hands in his pockets and his head bent. Diana, who in her anxiety kept a close watch upon Mr. Sheldon's movements, had noted his restlessness, and perceived in it the sign of growing anxiety on his part. She knew that he had once called himself surgeon-dentist, and had some medical knowledge, if not so much as he took credit for possessing. He must, therefore, be better able to judge the state of Charlotte's health than utterly ignorant observers. If he were uneasy, there must be real cause for uneasiness. It was on this account, and on this account only, that Diana watched him.

"He must love her better than I gave him credit for being able to love anyone," Miss Paget said to herself. "Dear girl! The coldest heart is touched by her sweetness."

Mr. Sheldon looked up from his newspaper as

Valentine came into the room, and saluted the visitor with a friendly nod.

"Glad to see you, Hawkehurst," he said. "*Semper fidelis*, and that kind of thing; the very model of devoted lovers. Why, man alive, how glum you look!"

"I think I have reason to look glum," answered Valentine gravely; "I have seen Charlotte."

"Yes? And don't you find her improving? —gradually, of course. That constitutional languor is not shaken off in a hurry. But surely you think her improving—brightening—"

"Brightening with the light that never shone on earth or sea. God help me! I—I—am the merest child, the veriest coward, the—" He made a great effort, and stifled the sob that had well-nigh broken his voice. "Mr. Sheldon," he continued quietly, "I believe your stepdaughter is dying."

"Dying! Good heavens, my dear Hawkehurst, this alarm is most—most premature. There is no cause for fear—at present, no cause—I give you my word as a medical man."

"No cause for alarm at present? That means my darling will not be taken from me to-night, or to-morrow. I shall have a few days' breathing-time. Yes, I understand. The doom is upon us. I saw the shadow of death upon her face to-day."

"My dear Hawkehurst—"

"My dear Sheldon, for pity's sake don't treat me as if I were a woman or a child. Let me know my fate. If—if—this, the worst, most bitter of all calamities God's hand—raised against me in punishment of past sins, sinned lightly and recklessly, in the days when my heart had no stake in the game of destiny—can inflict upon me; if this deadly sorrow is bearing down upon me, let me meet it like a man. Let me die with my eyes uncovered. O, my dearest, my fondest, redeeming angel of my ill-spent life! have you been only a supernal visitant, after all, shining on me for a little while, to depart when your mission of redemption is accomplished?"

"Powers above!" thought Mr. Sheldon, "what nonsense these sentimental magazine-writers can talk!"

He was in nowise melted by the lover's anguish, though it was very real. Such a grief as this was outside the circle in which his thoughts revolved. This display of grief was unpleasant to him. It grated painfully upon his nerves, as some of poor Tom Halliday's little speeches had done of old, when the honest-hearted Yorkshireman lay on his death-bed; and the young man's presence and the young man's anxiety were alike inconvenient.

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Sheldon," Valentine said presently, with suppressed intensity. "Is there any hope for my darling, any hope—"

Mr. Sheldon considered for some moments before he replied to this question. He pursed-up his lips and bent his brows with the same air of business-like deliberation that he might have assumed while weighing the relative merits of the first and second debenture bonds of some doubtful railway company.

"You ask me a trying question, Hawkehurst," he said at last. "If you ask me plainly whether I like the turn which Charlotte's illness

has taken within the last few weeks, I must tell you frankly, *I do not.* There is a persistent want of tone—a visible decay of vital power—which, I must confess, has caused me some uneasiness. You see, the fact is, there is a radical weakness of constitution—as Miss Paget, a very sensible girl and acute observer—herself has remarked, indeed a hereditary weakness; and against this medicine is sometimes unavailing. You need apprehend no neglect on my part, Hawkehurst; all that can possibly be done is being done. Dr. Doddleson's instructions are carefully obeyed, and—"

"Is this Dr. Doddleson competent to grapple with the case?" asked Valentine; "I never heard of him as a great man."

"That fact proves how little you know of the medical profession."

"I know nothing of it; I have had no need for doctors in my life. And you think this Dr. Doddleson really clever?"

"His position is a sufficient answer to that question."

"Will you let me telegraph for him—this afternoon—immediately?"

"You cannot telegraph from this place."

"No, but from St. Leonards I can. Do you think I am afraid of a five-mile walk?"

"But why send for Dr. Doddleson? The treatment he prescribed is the treatment we are now following to the letter. To summon him down here would be the merest folly. Our poor Charlotte's illness is, so far, free from all alarming symptoms."

"You do not see the change in her that I can see," cried Valentine piteously. "For mercy's sake, Mr. Sheldon, let me have my way in this. I cannot stand by and see my dear one fading and do nothing—nothing to save her. Let me send for this man. Let me see him myself, and hear what he says. You can have no objection to his coming, since he is the man you have chosen for Charlotte's adviser? It can only be a question of expense. Let this particular visit be my affair."

"I can afford to pay for my stepdaughter's

medical attendance without any help from your purse, Mr. Hawkehurst," said the stockbroker with offended pride. "There is one element in the case which you appear to ignore."

"What is that?"

"The alarm which this summoning of a doctor from London must cause in Charlotte's mind."

"It need cause no alarm. She can be told that Dr. Doddleson has come to this part of the world for a Sunday's change of air. The visit can appear to be made *en passant*. It will be easy to arrange that with the doctor before he sees her."

"As you please, Mr. Hawkehurst," the stockbroker replied coldly. "I consider such a visit to the last degree unnecessary; but if Dr. Doddleson's coming can give you any satisfaction, by all means let him come. The expense involved in summoning him is of the smallest consideration to me. My position with regard to my wife's daughter is one of extreme responsibility, and I am ready to perform all the obligations of that position."

"You are very good; your conduct in relation to Charlotte and myself has been beyond all praise. It is quite possible that I am over-anxious; but there was a look in that dear face—no—I cannot forget that look; it struck terror to my heart. I will go at once to St. Leonards. I can tell Charlotte that I am obliged to telegraph to the printer about my copy. You will not object to that white lie?"

"Not at all. I think it essential that Charlotte should not be alarmed. You had better stop to dine; there will be time for the telegram after dinner."

"I will not risk that," answered Valentine. "I cannot eat or drink till I have done something to lessen this wretched anxiety."

He went back to the room where Charlotte was sitting by the open window, through which there came the murmur of waves, the humming of drowsy bees, the singing of birds, all the happy voices of happy nature in a harmonious chorus.

"O, God, wilt Thou take her away from such a beautiful world," he asked, "and change

all the glory of earth to darkness and desolation for me?"

His heart rebelled against the idea of her death. To save her, to win her back to himself from the jaws of death, he was ready to promise anything, to do anything.

"All my days will I give to Thy service, if Thou wilt spare her to me," in his heart he said to his God. "If Thou dost not, I will be an infidel and a pagan—the vilest and most audacious of sinners. Better to serve Lucifer than the God who could so afflict me."

And this is where the semi-enlightened Christian betrays the weakness of his faith. While the sun shines, and the sweet gospel story reads to him like some tender Arcadian idyl, all love and promise, he is firm in his allegiance; but when the dark hour comes, he turns his face to the wall, with anger and disappointment in his heart, and will have no further commune with the God who has chastised him. His faith is the faith of the grateful leper, who, being healed, was eager to return and bless his divine benefactor. It is not

the faith of Abraham or of Job, of Paul or of Stephen.

Valentine told his story about the printers and the copy for the *Cheapside* magazine, about which there had arisen some absurd mistake, only to be set right by a telegram.

It was not a very clear account: but Charlotte did not perceive the vagueness of the story; she thought only of the one fact, that Valentine must leave her for some hours.

"The evening will seem so long without you," she said. "That is the worst part of my illness; the time is so long—so weary. Diana is the dearest and kindest of friends. She is always trying to amuse me, and reads to me for hours, though I know she must often be tired of reading aloud so long. But even the books I was once so fond of do not amuse me. The words seem to float indistinctly in my brain, and all sorts of strange images mix themselves up with the images of the people in the book. Di has been reading *The Bride of Lammermoor* all this morning; but the pain and weariness I feel seemed to be entangled

with Lucy and Edgar somehow, and the dear book gave me no pleasure."

"My darling, you—you are too weak to listen to Diana's reading. It is very kind of her to try to amuse you; but—but it would be better for you to rest altogether. Any kind of mental exertion may help to retard your recovery."

He had placed himself behind her chair, and was bending over the pillows to speak to her. Just now he felt himself unequal to the command of his countenance. He bent his head until his lips touched the soft brown hair, and kissed those loose soft tresses passionately. The thought occurred to him that a day might come when he should again kiss that soft brown hair, with a deeper passion, with a sharper pain, and when Charlotte would not know of his kisses, or pity his pain.

"O, Valentine!" cried Charlotte, "you are crying; I can see your face in the glass."

He had forgotten the glass; the little rococo mirror, with an eagle hovering over the top of the frame, which hung above the old-fashioned chiffonier.

"I am not so very ill, dear; I am not indeed," the girl continued, turning in her chair with an effort, and clasping her lover's hands; "you must not distress yourself like this, Valentine—dear Valentine! I shall be better by and by. I cannot think that I shall be taken from you."

He had broken down altogether by this time. He buried his face in the pillows, and contrived to stifle the sobs that would come; and then, after a sharp struggle, he lifted his face, and bent over the chair once more to kiss the invalid's pale upturned forehead.

"My dear one, you shall not, if love can guard and keep you. No, dear, I *cannot* believe that God will take you from me. Heaven may be your fittest habitation; but such sweet spirits as yours are sorely needed upon earth. I will be brave, dearest one; brave and hopeful in the mercy of Heaven. And now I must go and telegraph to my tiresome printer. *Au revoir!*"

He hurried away from the farmhouse, and started at a rattling pace along the pleasant road,

with green waving corn on his left, and broad blue ocean on his right.

"I can get a fly to bring me back from St. Leonards," he thought; "I should only lose time by hunting for a vehicle here."

He was at St. Leonards station within an hour after leaving the farm. He despatched the message in Mr. Sheldon's name, and took care to make it urgent.

CHAPTER VI.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

Fitful and feverish were the slumbers which visited Mr. Hawkehurst on that balmy summer's night. His waking hours were anxious and unhappy; but his sleeping hours were still more painful. To sleep was to be the feverish fool of vague wild visions, in which Charlotte and Dr. Doddleson, the editor of the *Cheapside*, the officials of the British Museum reading-room, Diana Paget, and the Sheldons, figured amidst inextricable confusion of circumstances and places. Throughout these wretched dreams he had some consciousness of himself and the room in which he was lying, the July moon shining upon him, broad and bright, through the diamond-paned lattice. And O, what torturing visions were those in which Charlotte smiled upon him, radiant

with health and happiness; and there had been no such thing as her illness, no such thing as his grief. And then came hurried dreams, in which Dr. Doddleson was knocking at the farmhouse door, with the printer of the *Cheapside*. And then he was a spectator in a mighty theatre, large as those Roman amphitheatres, wherein the audience seemed a mass of flies, looking down on the encounter of two other flies, and all the glory of an imperial court only a little spot of purple and gold, gleaming afar in the sunshine. To the dreamer it was no surprise that this unknown theatre of his dreams should be vast as the gladiatorial arena. And then came the deep thunderous music of innumerable bass-viols and bassoons; and someone told him it was the first night of a great tragedy. He felt the breathless hush of expectation; the solemn bass music sank deeper; dark curtains were drawn aside, with a motion slow and solemn, like the waving of mountain pines, and there appeared a measureless stage, revealing a moonlit expanse, thickly studded with the white headstones of unnumbered graves, and

on the foremost of these—revealed to him by what power he knew not, since mortal sight could never have reached a point so distant—he read the name of Charlotte Halliday. He awoke with a sharp cry of pain. It was broad day, and the waves were dancing gaily in the morning sunlight. He rose and dressed himself. Sleep, such as he had known that night, was worse than the weariest waking. He went out into the garden by and by, and paced slowly up and down the narrow pathways, beside which box of a century's growth rose dark and high. Pale yellow lights were in the upper windows. He wondered which of those sickly tapers flickered on the face he loved so fondly.

"It is only a year since I first saw her," he thought; "one year! And to love her has been my 'liberal education;' to lose her would be my desolation and despair."

To lose her! His thoughts approached that dread possibility, but could not realise it; not even yet.

At eight o'clock Diana came to summon him to breakfast.

"Shall I see Charlotte?" he asked.

"No; for some time past she has not come down to breakfast."

"What kind of night has she had?"

"A very quiet night, she tells me; but I am not quite sure that she tells me the truth, she is so afraid of giving us uneasiness."

"She tells you. But do you not sleep in her room, now that she is so ill?"

"No. I was anxious to sleep on a sofa at the foot of her bed, and proposed doing so, but Mr. Sheldon objects to my being in the room. He thinks that Charlotte is more quiet entirely alone, and that there is more air in the room with only one sleeper. Her illness is not of a kind to require attention of any sort in the night."

"Still, I should have thought it better for her to have you with her, to cheer and comfort her."

"Believe me, Valentine, I wished to be with her."

"I am sure of that, dear," he answered kindly.

"It was only Mr. Sheldon's authority, as a

man of some medical experience, that conquered my wish."

"Well, I suppose he is right. And now we must go in to breakfast. Ah, the dreary regularity of these breakfasts and dinners, which go on just the same when our hearts are breaking!"

The breakfast was indeed a dreary, soul-dispiriting meal. Farmhouse luxuries, in the way of new-laid eggs and home-cured bacon, abounded; but no one had any inclination for these things. Valentine remembered the homestead among the Yorkshire hills, with all the delight that he had known there; and the "sorrow's crown of sorrow" was very bitter. Mr. Sheldon gave his Sabbath-morning meditations to the study of a Saturday-evening share-list; and Georgy plunged ever and anon into the closely-printed pages of a Dissenting preacher's biography, which she declared to be "comforting."

Diana and Valentine sat silent and anxious; and after the faintest pretence of eating and drinking, they both left the table, to stroll drearily in the garden. The bells were ringing cheerily from

the gray stone tower near at hand; but Valentine had no inclination for church on this particular morning. Were not all his thoughts prayers—humble, piteous entreaties—for one priceless boon?

"Will you see the doctor when he comes, and manage matters so as not to alarm Charlotte?" he asked of Mr. Sheldon.

That gentleman agreed to do so, and went out into the little front-garden to lie in wait for the great Doddleson — "Dowager Doddleson" as he was surnamed by some irreverent unbelievers.

A St.-Leonards fly brought the Doctor while the bells were still ringing for morning service. Mr. Sheldon received him at the gate, and explained the motive of his summons.

The Doctor was full of pompous solicitude about "our sweet young patient."

"Really one of the most interesting cases I ever had upon my hands," the West-end physician said blandly; "as I was remarking to a very charming patient of mine—in point of fact, the amiable and accomplished Countess of Kassel-Kumberterre only last Tee-usday morning. A

case so nearly resembling the Countess's own condition as to be highly interesting to her."

"I really ought to apologise for bringing you down," said Mr. Sheldon, as he led the doctor into the house. "I only consented to your being sent for in order to tranquillise this young fellow Hawkehurst, who is engaged to my daughter; a rising man, I believe, in his own particular line, but rather wild and impracticable. There is really no change for the worse, absolutely none; and as we have not been here more than three days, there has been positively no opportunity for testing the effect of change and sea-air, and so on."

This seemed rather like giving the learned physician his cue. And there were those among Dr. Doddleson's professional rivals who said that the worthy doctor was never slow to take a cue so given, not being prejudiced by any opinions of his own.

Charlotte had by this time been established in her easy-chair by the open window of the sitting-room, and here Dr. Doddleson saw her, in the pre-

sence of Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon; and here Dr. Doddleson went through the usual Abracadabra of his art, and assented to the opinions advanced, with all deference, by Mr. Sheldon.

To Georgy this interview, in which Mr. Sheldon's opinions were pompously echoed by the West-end physician, proved even more comforting than the benignant career of the Dissenting minister, who was wont to allude to that solemn passing hence of which the ancients spoke in dim suggestive phrase, as "going upstairs."

Diana and Valentine strolled in the garden while the physician saw his patient. Dr. Doddleson's ponderous polysyllables floated out upon the summer air like the droning of a bumble-bee. It was a relief to Valentine to know that the doctor was with his patient; but he had no intention to let that gentleman depart unquestioned.

"I will take no secondhand information," he thought; "I will hear this man's opinion from his own lips."

He went round to the front of the house directly the droning had ceased, and was in the

way when Dr. Doddleson and Mr. Sheldon came out of the rose-hung porch.

"If you have no objection," he said to Mr. Sheldon, "I should like to ask Dr. Doddleson a few questions."

"*I* have no objection," replied the stock-broker; "but it is really altogether such an unusual thing, and I doubt if Dr. Doddleson will consent to—"

And here he cast a deprecating glance at the doctor, as who should say, "Can you permit yourself to comply with a demand so entirely unwarranted by precedent?"

Dowager Doddleston was eminently good-natured.

"And this is our sweet young friend's *fiancé*," he said; "dear me—dee-ar me!"

And then he looked at Valentine with bland pale-blue eyes that twinkled behind his gold-framed spectacles; while Valentine was taking his measure, so far as the measure of any man's moral and intellectual force can be taken by the eyes of another man.

"And this is the man who is chosen to snatch my darling from the jaws of death!" he said to himself, with burning rage in his heart, while the amiable physician repeated blandly:

"And this is our sweet young patient's *fiancé*. Dee-ar me, how very interesting!"

The three men strolled round to the garden behind the house, Mr. Sheldon close at the physician's elbow.

"For God's sake, tell me the truth, Dr. Doddleson!" said Valentine in a low hoarse voice, directly they were beyond ear-shot of the house. "I am a man, and I can steel myself to hear the worst you can tell."

"But really, Hawkehurst, there is no occasion for this kind of thing," interjected Philip Sheldon; "Dr. Doddleson agrees with me that the case is one of extreme languor, and no more."

"Unquestionably," said the Doctor in a fat voice.

"And Dr. Doddleson also coincides with me in the opinion that all we can do is to wait the reviving influence of sea-air."

"Undoubtedly," said the Doctor, with a solemn nod.

"And is this all?" asked Valentine hopelessly.

"My dear sir, what else can I say?" said the Doctor; "as my good friend Mr. Sheldon has just remarked, there is extreme languor; and as my good friend Mr. Sheldon further observes, we must await the effect of change of air. The —aw—invigorating sea-breezes, the—aw—enlivening influence of new surroundings, and—aw —so forth. Dr. Poseidon, my dear sir, is a very valuable coadjutor."

"And you think your patient no worse, Dr. Doddleson?"

"The Doctor has just left Mrs. Sheldon much comforted by his assurance that her daughter is better," said the stockbroker.

"No, no!" exclaimed Dr. Doddleson; "no, no! *there* my good friend Mr. Sheldon somewhat misrepresents me. I said that our patient was not obviously worse. I did not say that our patient was better. There is a dilatation of

the pupil of the eye which I don't quite understand."

"Mental excitement," said Mr. Sheldon somewhat hastily; "Charlotte is nervous to an extreme degree, and your sudden arrival was calculated to shake her nerves."

"Undoubtedly," rejoined the Doctor; "and it is unquestionable that such a dilatation of the pupil might, under certain circumstances, be occasioned by mental excitement. I am sorry to find that our patient's attacks of dizziness—"

"Which are purely the effect of fancy," interjected Mr. Sheldon.

"Which are no doubt, in some measure, attributable to a hypochondriacal condition of mind," continued the Doctor in his fat voice. "I am sorry to find that this periodical dizziness has been somewhat increased of late. But here again we must look to Dr. Poseidon. Tepid sea-baths, if they can be managed, in the patient's own room; and by and by a dip in the waves yonder may do wonders."

Valentine asked no further questions; and

the physician departed in the St.-Leonards fly, to turn his excursion to profitable use by calling on two or three dowagers in Warrior-square and Marina, who would doubtless be glad of an unexpected visit from their pet doctor.

"Well, Hawkehurst," said Mr. Sheldon, when the fly had driven away, "I hope you are satisfied now?"

"Satisfied!" cried Valentine; "yes, I am satisfied that your stepdaughter is being murdered!"

"Murdered!" echoed the stockbroker, his voice thick and faint; but Valentine did not heed the change in it.

"Yes, murdered—sacrificed to the utter incompetence of that old idiot who has just left us."

Philip Sheldon drew a long breath.

"What!" he exclaimed; "do you doubt Doddleson's skill?"

"Do you believe in it? Do you? No; I cannot think that a man of your keen perception in all other matters—half a medical man yourself—can be the dupe of so shallow an impostor.

And it is to that man's judgment my darling's life has been confided; and it is to that man I have looked, with hope and comfort in the thought of his power to save my treasure. Good God! what a reed on which to rely! And of all the medical men of London, this is the one you have chosen!"

"I must really protest against this rant, Hawkehurst," said Philip Sheldon. "I hold myself responsible for the selection which I made, and will not have that selection questioned in this violent and outrageous manner by you. Your anxiety for Charlotte's recovery may excuse a great deal, but it cannot excuse this kind of thing; and if you cannot command yourself better, I must beg you to absent yourself from my house until my stepdaughter's recovery puts an end to all this fuss."

"Do you believe in Dr. Doddleson's skill?" asked Valentine doggedly. He wanted to have that question answered at any cost.

"Most decidedly I do, with the rest of the medical world. My choice of this gentleman as

Charlotte's adviser was governed by his reputation as a safe and conscientious man. His opinions are sound, trustworthy—"

"*His* opinions!" cried Valentine with a bitter laugh; "what in heaven's name do you call his opinions? The only opinions I could extract from him to-day were solemn echoes of yours. And the man himself! I took the measure of him before I asked him a question; and physiology is a lie, if that man is anything better than an impostor!"

"His position is the answer to that."

"His position is no answer. He is not the first impostor who has attained position, and is not likely to be the last. You must forgive me, if I speak with some violence, Mr. Sheldon. I feel too deeply to remember the conventionalities of my position. The dear girl yonder, hovering between life and death, is my promised wife. As your stepdaughter she is very dear to you, no doubt, and you are of course anxious to do your duty as her stepfather. But she is all the world to me—my one sweet memory of the past, my sole hope

for the future. I will not trust her to the care of Dr. Doddleson; I claim the right to choose another physician; as that man's coadjutor, if you please. I have no wish to offend the doctor of your choice."

"This is all sheer nonsense," said Mr. Sheldon.

"It is nonsense about which you must let me have my own way," replied Valentine resolutely. "My stake on this hazard is too heavy for careless play. I shall go back to town at once and seek out a physician."

"Do you know any great man?"

"No; but I will find one."

"If you go to-day, you will inevitably alarm Charlotte."

"True; and disappoint her, into the bargain. I suppose, in such a case, to-morrow will do as well as to-day?"

"Decidedly."

"I can go by the first train, and return with my doctor in the afternoon. Yes, I will go to-morrow."

Mr. Sheldon breathed more freely. There are

cases in which to obtain time for thought seems the one essential thing—cases in which a reprieve is as good as a pardon.

"Pray let us consider this business quietly," he said, with a faint sigh of weariness. "There is no necessity for all this excitement. You can go to town to-morrow, by the first train, as you say. If it is any satisfaction to you to bring down a physician, bring one; bring half-a-dozen, if you please. But, for the last time, I most emphatically assure you that anything that tends to alarm Charlotte, is the one thing of all others most sure to hinder her recovery."

"I know that. She shall not be frightened; but she shall have a better adviser than Dr. Doddleson. And now I will go back to the house. She will wonder at my absence."

He went to the bright, airy room where Charlotte was seated, her head lying back upon the pillows, her face paler, her glances and tones more languid than on the previous day, as it seemed to Valentine. Diana was near her, solicitous and tender; and on the other side of the window sat

Mrs. Sheldon, with her Dissenting minister's biography open on her lap.

All through that day Valentine Hawkehurst played his part bravely; it was a hard and bitter part to play—the part of hope and confidence—while unutterable fears were rending his heart. He read the epistle and gospel of the day to his betrothed; and afterwards some chapters of St. John—those profoundly mournful chapters that foreshadow the agonising close. It was Charlotte who selected these chapters, and her lover could find no excuse for disputing her choice.

It was the first time that they had shared any religious exercise, and the hearts of both were deeply touched by the thought of this.

"How frivolous all our talk must have been, Valentine, when it seems so new to us to be reading these beautiful words together!"

Her head was half supported by the pillows, half resting on her lover's shoulder, and her eyes travelled along the lines as he read, in a calm, low voice, which was unbroken to the end.

Early in the evening Charlotte retired, worn

out by the day's physical weariness, in spite of Valentine's fond companionship. Later, when it was dusk, Diana came downstairs with the news that the invalid was sleeping quietly. Mrs. Sheldon was dozing in her arm-chair, the Dissenting minister having fallen to the ground; and Valentine was leaning, with folded arms, on the broad window-sill, looking out into the shadowy garden. Mr. Sheldon had given them very little of his society during that day. He went out immediately after his interview with Valentine, on a sea-coast ramble, which lasted till dinner-time. After dinner he remained in the room where they had dined. He was there now. The light of the candles, by which he read his papers, shone out upon the dusk.

"Will you come for a stroll with me, Diana?" asked Valentine.

Miss Paget assented promptly; and they went out into the garden, beyond the reach of Mr. Sheldon's ears, had that gentleman been disposed to place himself at his open window in the character of a listener.

"I want to tell you my plans about Charlotte," Valentine began. "I am going to London to-morrow to search for a greater physician than Dr. Doddleson. I shall find my man in an hour or so; and, if possible, shall return with him in the evening. There is no apparent reason to anticipate any sudden change for the worse; but if such a change should take place, I rely on you, dear, to give me the earliest tidings of it. I suppose you can get a fly here, if you want one?"

"I can get to St. Leonards, if that is what you mean," Miss Paget answered promptly. "I daresay there is a fly to be had; if not, I can walk there. I am not afraid of a few miles' walk, by day or night. If there should be a change, Valentine—which God forbid—I will telegraph the tidings of it to you."

"You had better address the message to me at Raney's, Covent-garden; the house where the Ragamuffins have their roo ms, you know, dear. That is a more central point than my lodgings; and nearer the terminus. I will call there two or three times in the course of the day."

"You may trust my vigilance, Valentine. I did not think it was in my nature to love anyone as I love Charlotte Halliday."

Gustave Lenoble's letters lying unanswered in her desk asserted the all-absorbing nature of Diana's affection for the fading girl. She *was* fading. The consciousness of this made all other love sacrilege, as it seemed to Diana. She sat up late that night to answer Gustave's last letter of piteous complaint.

"She had forgotten him. Ah, that he had been foolish—insensate—to confide himself in her love! Was he not old and gray in comparison to such youth—such freshness—a venerable dotard of thirty-five? What had he with dreams of love and marriage? Fie, then. He humiliated himself in the dust beneath her mignon feet. He invited her to crush him with those cruel feel. But if she did not answer his letters, he would come to Harold's-hill. He would mock himself of that ferocious Sheldon—of a battalion of Sheldons, still

more ferocious—of all the world, at last—to be near her."

"Believe me, dear Gustave, I do not forget," wrote Diana, in reply to these serio-comic remonstrances. "I was truly sorry to leave town, on your account and on my father's. But my dear adopted sister is paramount with me now. You will not grudge her my care or my love, for she may not long be with me to claim them. There is nothing but sorrow here in all our hearts; sorrow, and an ever-present dread."

Book the Seventh.

A FIGHT AGAINST TIME.

CHAPTER I.

A DREAD REVELATION.

THE early fast train by which Valentine Hawkehurst travelled brought him into town at a quarter past nine o'clock. During the journey he had been meditating on the way in which he should set to work when he arrived in London. No ignorance could be more profound than his on all points relating to the medical profession. Dimly floating in his brain there were the names of doctors whom he had heard of as celebrated men—one for the chest, another for the liver, another for the skin, another for the eyes; but among all these famous men, who was the man best able to cope with the mysterious wasting away, the gradual, almost imperceptible ebbing of that one dear life which Valentine wanted to save?

This question must be answered by someone;

and Valentine was sorely puzzled as to who that someone must be.

The struggling young writer had but few friends. He had, indeed, worked too hard for the possibility of friendship. The cultivation of the severer Muses is rarely compatible with a wide circle of acquaintances; and Valentine, if not a cultivator of these severe ones, had been a hard and honest worker during the later reputable portion of his life. His friendships of the previous portion had been the friendships of the railway-carriage and the smoking-room, the *café* and the gaming-table. He could count upon his fingers the people to whom he could apply for counsel in this crisis of his life. There was George Sheldon, a man for whom he entertained a most profound contempt; Captain Paget, a man who might or might not be able to give him good advice, but who would inevitably sacrifice Charlotte Halliday's welfare to self-interest, if self-interest could be served by the recommendation of an incompetent adviser.

"He would send me to some idiot of the Dod-

dleson class, if he thought he could get a guinea or a dinner by the recommendation," Valentine said to himself, and decided that to Horatio Paget he would not apply. There were his employers, the editors and proprietors of the magazines for which he worked: all busy, over-burdened workers in the great mill, spending the sunny hours of their lives between a pile of unanswered letters and a waste-paper basket; men who would tell him to look in the Post-office Directory, without lifting their eyes from the paper over which their restless pens were speeding.

No. Amongst these was not the counsellor whom Valentine Hawkehurst needed in this dire hour of difficulty.

"There are some very good fellows among the Ragamuffins," he said to himself, as he thought of the only literary and artistic club of which he was a member; "fellows who stuck by me when I was down in the world, and who would do anything to serve me now they know me for an honest worker. But, unfortunately, farce-writers and burlesque writers, and young meerschaum-smoking painters,

are not the sort of men to give good advice: I want the advice of a medical man."

Mr. Hawkehurst almost bounded from his seat as he said this. The advice of a medical man? Yes; and was there not a medical man among the Ragamuffins? and something more than a medical man? That very doctor, who of all other men upon this earth could best give him counsel: the doctor who had stood by the death-bed of Charlotte Halliday's father.

He remembered the conversation that had occurred at Bayswater, on the evening of Christmas-day, upon this very subject. He remembered how from the talk about ghosts, they had drifted somehow into talking of Tom Halliday; whereupon Mrs. Sheldon had been melted to tears, and had gone on to praise Philip Sheldon's conduct to his dying friend, and to speak of Mr. Burkham, the strange doctor, called in too late to save, or, it might have been, incapable to save.

"Sheldon seems to have a genius for calling in incapable doctors," he thought bitterly.

Incapable as Mr. Burkham might have been for

the exigencies of this particular case, he would at least be able to inform Valentine who among the medical celebrities of London would be best adapted to advise in such an illness as Charlotte Halliday's.

"And if, as Diana has sometimes suggested, there is any hereditary disease, this Burkham may be able to throw some light upon the nature of it," thought Valentine.

He went straight from the railway terminus to the quiet tavern, upon the first-floor of which the Ragamuffins had their place of rendezvous. It was not an hour for the encounter of many Ragamuffins. A meek-looking young man, of clerical aspect, who had adapted a Palais-Royal farce, and had awoke in the morning to find himself famous, and eligible for admission amongst the Ragamuffins, was sipping his sherry and soda-water, while he skimmed the morning papers. Him Mr. Hawkehurst saluted with an absent nod, and went in search of the steward of the club; from whom he obtained Mr. Burkham's address, with some little trouble in the way of hunting through old and obscure documents.

It was the old address; the old dingy, comfortable, muffin-bell-haunted street in which Mr. Burkham had lived ten years before, when he was summoned to attend the sick Yorkshire farmer.

Mr. Burkham's career had not been brightened by the sunshine of prosperity. He had managed to live somehow, and to find food and raiment for his young wife, who, when she considered the lilies of the field, may have envied their shining robes of pure whiteness, so dingy and dark was her own apparel. When children came, the young surgeon contrived to find food and raiment for them also, but not without daily and hourly struggles with that grim wolf who haunts the thresholds of so many dwellings, and will not be thrust from the door. Sometimes a little glimmering ray of light illumined Mr. Burkham's pathway, and he was humbly grateful to Providence for the brief glimpse of sunshine. But for a meek fair-faced man, with a nervous desire to do well, a very poor opinion of his own merits, and a diffident, not to say depressed manner, the world is apt to be a hard battle-ground.

Mr. Burkham sometimes found himself well-nigh beaten in the cruel strife; and at such times, in the dead silence of the night, with mortal agonies, and writhings as of Pythoness upon tripod, Mr. Burkham gave himself up to the composition of a farce, adapted, not from the French, but from his memories of Wright and Bedford in the jovial old student days, when the pit of the Adelphi Theatre had been the pleasant resort of his evenings. He could no longer afford the luxury of theatrical entertainments, except when provided with a free admission. But from the hazy reminiscences floating in his poor tired brain he concocted little pieces which he fondly hoped might win him money and fame.

With much effort and interest he contrived to get himself elected a Ragamuffin; believing that to be a Ragamuffin was to secure a position as a dramatic writer. But with one or two fortunate exceptions, his pieces were refused. The managers would not have the poor little feeble phantasmagoria of bygone fun, even supported by the whole clan of Ragamuffins. So Mr. Burk-

ham had gradually melted into the dimness of Bloomsbury, and haunted the club-room of the Ragamuffins no more.

A hansom carried Valentine Hawkehurst swiftly to these regions of Bloomsbury. It was no time for the saving of cab-hire. The soldier of fortune thought no longer of his nest-eggs—his Unitas Bank deposit-notes. He was fighting with time and with death; foes dire and dreadful, against whose encroachments the sturdiest of mortal warriors can make but a feeble stand. He found the dingy-looking house in the dingy-looking street; and the humble drudge who opened the door informed him that Mr. Burkham was at home, and ushered him into a darksome and dreary surgery at the back of the house, where a phrenological head, considerably the worse for London smoke, surmounted a dingy bookcase filled with the dingiest of books. A table, upon which were a blotting-book and ink-stand, and two shabby horsehair chairs, composed the rest of the furniture. Valentine sent his card to the surgeon, and seated himself on one of the

horsehair chairs, to await that gentleman's appearance.

He came after a brief delay, which seemed long to his visitor. He came from regions in the back of the house, rubbing his hands, which seemed to have been newly washed, and the odour of senna and aloes hung about his garments.

"I doubt if you remember my name, Mr. Burkham," said Valentine; "but you and I are members of the same club, and that a club among the members of which considerable good feeling prevails. I come to ask a favour"—Mr. Burkham winced, for this sounded like genteel begging, and for genteel beggars this struggling surgeon had no spare cash — "which it will scarcely cause you a moment's thought to grant. I am in great distress,"—Mr. Burkham winced again; for this sounded still more like begging— "mental distress,"—Mr. Burkham gave a little sigh of relief—"and I come to you for advice," —Mr. Burkham gave a more profound sigh of relief.

"I can assure you that my best advice is at your command," he said, seating himself, and motioning to his visitor to be seated. "I am beginning to remember your face amongst the members of the club, though the name on your card did not strike me as familiar. You see, I have never been able to afford much time for relaxation at the Ragamuffins', though I assure you I found the agreeable conversation there, the literary *on-dits*, and so on, a very great relief. But my own little efforts in the dramatic line were not successful, and I found myself compelled to devote myself more to my profession. And now I have said quite enough about myself: let me hear how I can be useful to you."

"In the first place, let me ask you a question. Do you know anything of a certain Dr. Doddleson?"

"Of Plantagenet-square?"

"Yes; of Plantagenet-square."

"Well, not much. I have heard him called Dowager Doddleson; and I believe he is very popular among hypochondriac old ladies who have

more money than they know what to do with, and very little common sense to regulate their disposal of it."

"Is Dr. Doddleson a man to whom you would intrust the life of your dearest friend?"

"Most emphatically no!" cried the surgeon, growing red with excitement.

"Very well, Mr. Burkham; my dearest friend, a young lady—well, in plain truth, the woman who was to have been my wife, and whom I love as it is not the lot of every plighted wife to be loved; this dear girl has been wasting away for the last two or three months under the influence of an inscrutable malady, and Dr. Doddleson is the only man called to attend her in all that time."

"A mistake!" said Mr. Burkham gravely; "a very great mistake! Dr. Doddleson lives in a fine square, and drives a fine carriage, and has a reputation amongst the class I have spoken of; but he is about the last man I would consult as to the health of anyone dear to me."

"That is precisely the opinion which I formed

after ten minutes' conversation with him. Now, what I want from you, Mr. Burkham, is the name and address of the man to whom I can intrust this dear girl's life."

"Let me see. There are so many men, you know, and great men. Is it a case of consumption?"

"No, thank God!"

"Heart-disease, perhaps?"

"No; there is no organic disease. It is a languor—a wasting away."

Mr. Burkham suggested other diseases whereof the outward sign was languor and wasting.

"No," replied Valentine; "according to Dr. Doddleson there is actually no disease—nothing but this extreme prostration—this gradual vanishing of vital power. And now I come to another point upon which I want your advice. It has been suggested that this constitutional weakness may be inherited; and here I think you can help me."

"How so?"

"You attended the lady's father."

"Indeed!" cried Mr. Burkham, delighted. "This is really interesting. In what year did I attend this gentleman? If you will allow me, I'll refer to some of my old case-books."

He drew out a clumsy drawer in the clumsy table, in order to hunt for old memoranda.

"I am not quite certain as to the year," answered Valentine; "but it was more than ten years ago. The gentleman died close by here, in Fitzgeorge-street. His name was Halliday."

Mr. Burkham had drawn out the drawer to its furthest extent. As Valentine pronounced this name, he let it drop to the ground with a crash, and sat, statue-like, staring at the speaker. All other names given to mortal man he might forget; but this one, never. Valentine saw the sudden horror in his face, before he could recompose his features into something of their conventional aspect.

"Yes," he said, looking down at the fallen drawer with its scattered papers and case-books, "yes, I have some recollection of the name of Halliday."

"Some very strange and agitating recollection it would seem by your manner, Mr. Burkham," said Valentine, at once assured that there was something more than common in the surgeon's look and gesture; and determined to fathom the mystery, let it be what it might.

"O dear no," said the surgeon nervously; "I was not agitated, only surprised. It was surprising to me to hear the name of a patient so long forgotten. And so the lady to whom you are engaged is a daughter of Mr. Halliday's? The wife—Mrs. Halliday—is still living, I suppose?"

"Yes; but the lady who was then Mrs. Halliday is now Mrs. Sheldon."

"Of course; he married her," said Mr. Burkham. "Yes; I remember hearing of the marriage."

He had tried in vain to recover his old composure. He was white to the lips, and his hand shook, as he tried to arrange his scattered papers.

"What does it mean?" thought Valentine. "Mrs. Sheldon talked of this man's inexperience.

Can it be that his incompetency lost the life of his patient, and that he knows it was so?"

"Mrs. Halliday is now Mrs. Sheldon," repeated the surgeon in a feeble manner. "Yes; I remember, and Mr. Sheldon—the dentist, who at that time resided in Fitzgeorge-street; is he still living?"

"He is still living. It was he who called in Dr. Doddleson to attend upon Miss Halliday. As her stepfather, he has some amount of authority, you see; not legal authority—for my dear girl is of age—but social authority. He called in Doddleson, and appears to place confidence in him; and as he is something of a medical man himself, and pretends to understand Miss Halliday's case thoroughly—"

"Stop!" cried Mr. Burkham, suddenly abandoning all pretence of calmness. "Has he—Sheldon—any interest in his stepdaughter's death?"

"No, certainly not. All her father's money went to him upon his marriage with her mother. He can gain nothing by her death; on the con-

trary, he may lose a good deal, for she is the heir-at-law to a large fortune."

"And if she dies, that fortune will go—"

"I really don't know where it will go," Valentine answered carelessly; he thought the subject was altogether beside the question of Mr. Burkham's agitation, and it was the cause of that agitation which he was anxious to discover.

"If Mr. Sheldon can gain by his stepdaughter's death, fear him!" exclaimed the surgeon with sudden passion; "fear him as you would fear death itself—worse than death, for death is neither so stealthy nor so treacherous as he is!"

"What in heaven's name do you mean?"

"That which I thought my lips would never utter to mortal hearing—that which I dare not publicly proclaim, at the hazard of taking the bread out of the mouths of my wife and children. I have kept this hateful secret for eleven years—through many a sleepless night and dreary day. I will tell it to you; for if there is another life in peril, that life shall be lost through no cowardice of mine."

"What secret?" cried Valentine.

"The secret of that poor fellow's death. My God, I can remember the clasp of his hand, and the friendly look of his eyes, the day before he died. He was poisoned by Philip Sheldon!"

"You must be mad!" gasped Valentine in a faint voice.

For one moment of astonishment and incredulity he thought this man must needs be a fool or a lunatic, so wildly improbable did the accusation seem. But in the next instant the curtain was lifted, and he knew that Philip Sheldon was a villain, and knew that he had never wholly trusted him.

"Never until to-day have I told this secret," said the surgeon; "not even to my wife."

"I thank you," answered Valentine in the same faint voice; "with all my heart, I thank you."

Yes, the curtain was lifted. This mysterious illness, this slow silent decay of bloom and beauty, by a process inscrutable as the devilry of mediæval poisoner or Hecate-serving witch—this was

murder. Murder! The disease, which had hitherto been nameless, had found its name at last. It was all clear now. Philip Sheldon's anxiety; the selection of an utterly incompetent adviser; certain looks and tones that had for a moment mystified him, and had been forgotten in the next, came back to him with a strange distinctness, with all their hidden meaning made clear and plain as the broad light of day.

But the motive? What motive could prompt the slow destruction of that innocent life? A fortune was at stake, it is true; but that fortune, as Valentine understood the business, depended on the life of Charlotte Halliday. Beyond this point he had never looked. In all his consideration of the circumstances relating to the Haygarthian estate, he had never thought of what might happen in the event of Charlotte's decease.

"It is a diabolical mystery," he said to himself. "There can be no motive—*none*. To destroy Thomas Halliday was to clear his way to fortune; to destroy Charlotte is to destroy his chance of fortune."

And then he remembered the dark speeches of George Sheldon.

"My God! and *this* was what he meant, as plainly as he dared tell me! He did tell me that his brother was an unutterable scoundrel; and I turned a deaf ear to his warning, because it suited my own interest to believe that villain. For her dear sake I believed him. I would have believed in Beelzebub, if he had promised me her dear hand. And I let myself be duped by the lying promise, and left my darling in the power of Beelzebub!"

Thoughts followed each other swift as lightning through his overwrought brain. It seemed but a moment that he had been sitting with his clenched hands pressed against his forehead, when he turned suddenly upon the surgeon.

"For God's sake, help me, guide me!" he said. "You have struck a blow that has numbed my senses. What am I to do? My future wife is in that man's keeping—dying, as I believe. How am I to save her?"

"I cannot tell you. You may take the cle-

verest man in London to see her; but it is a question if that man will perceive the danger so clearly as to take prompt measures. In these cases there is always room for doubt; and a man would rather doubt his own perceptions than believe the hellish truth. It is by this natural hesitation so many lives are lost. While the doctor deliberates, the patient dies. And then, if the secret of the death transpires,—by circumstantial evidence, perhaps, which never came to the doctor's knowledge,—there is a public outcry. The doctor's practice is ruined, and his heart broken. The outcry would have been still louder, if he had told the truth in time to save the patient, and had not been able to prove his words. You think me a coward and a scoundrel because I dared not utter my suspicion when I saw Mr. Halliday dying. While it was only a suspicion, it would have been certain ruin for me to give utterance to it. The day came when it was almost a conviction. I went back to that man Sheldon's house, determined to insist upon the calling in of a physician, who would have made that conviction

certainty. My resolution came too late. It is possible that Sheldon had perceived my suspicions, and had hastened matters. My patient was dead before I reached the house."

"How am I to save her?" repeated Valentine, with the same helpless manner. He could not bring himself to consider Tom Halliday's death. The subject was too far away from him,—remote as the dim shadows of departed centuries. In all the universe there were but two figures standing out in lurid brightness against the dense night of chaos,—a helpless girl held in the clutches of a secret assassin: and it was his work to rescue her.

"What am I to do?" he asked. "Tell me what I am to do."

"What it may be wisest to do I cannot tell you," answered Mr. Burkham, almost as helplessly as the other had asked the question. "I can give you the name of the best man to get to the bottom of such a case,—a man who gave evidence on the Fryar trial,—Jedd. You have heard of Jedd, I daresay. You had better go straight to Jedd, and take him down with you

to Miss Halliday. His very name will frighten Sheldon."

"I will go at once. Stay — the address! Where am I to find Dr. Jedd?"

"In Burlington-row. But there is one thing to be considered."

"What?"

"The interference of Jedd may only make that man desperate. He may hasten matters now, as he hastened matters before. If you had seen his coolness at that time; if you had seen him as I saw him, standing by that poor fellow's deathbed, — comforting him, — yes, with friendly speeches, — laughing and joking, watching the agonising pain and the miserable sickness, and all the dreary wretchedness of such a death, — and *never* swerving from his work; — if you had seen him, you would understand why I am afraid to advise you. That man was as desperate as he was cool, when he murdered his friend. He will be more reckless this time."

"Why?"

"Because he has reached a higher stage in

the science of murder. The symptoms of that poor Yorkshireman were the symptoms of arsenical poisoning; the symptoms of which you have told me to-day denote a vegetable poison. *That* affords very vague diagnosis, and leaves no trace. That was the agent which enabled the Borgias to decimate Rome. It is older than classic Greece, and simple as *a b c*, and will remain so until the medical expert is a recognised officer of the law, the faithful guardian of the bed over which the suspected poisoner loiters,—past-master of the science in which the murderer is rarely more than an experimentalist, and protected from all the hazards of plain-speaking by the nature of his office."

"Great heaven, how am I to save her!" exclaimed Valentine. He could not contemplate the subject in its broad social aspect; he could only think of this one dear life at stake. "To send this Dr. Jedd might be to hasten her death; to send a less efficient man would be mere childishness. WHAT shall I do?"

He looked despairingly at the surgeon, and in

that one glance perceived what a frail reed this was upon which he was leaning. And then, like the sudden gleam of lightning, a name flashed across his mind—George Sheldon, the lawyer, the schemer, the man who of all the world best knew this vile enemy and assassin against whom he was matched; he it was of whom counsel should be asked in this crisis. Once perceiving this, Valentine was prompt to act. It was the first flash of light in the darkness.

"You mean to stand by me in this, don't you?" he asked Mr. Burkham.

"With all my heart and soul."

"Good. Then you must go to Dr. Jedd instantly. Tell him all you know: Tom Halliday's death; the symptoms of Charlotte's decline, as you have heard them from me—*everything;* and let him hold himself in readiness to start for Hastings directly he hears from or sees me. I am going to a man who of all men can tell me how to deal with Philip Sheldon. I shall try to be in Burlington-row in an hour from this time; but in any case you will wait there till I come.

I suppose, in a desperate case like this, Dr. Jedd will put aside all less urgent work?"

"No doubt of that."

"I trust to you to secure his sympathy," said Valentine.

He was in the darksome entrance-hall by this time. Mr. Burkham followed, and opened the door for him.

"Have no fear of me," he said. "Good-bye."

The two men shook hands with a grip significant as masonic sign-manual. It meant on the one part hearty coöperation, on the other implicit confidence. In the next moment Valentine sprang into the cab.

"King's-road—entrance to Gray's Inn, and drive like mad!" he shouted to the driver. The hansom rattled across the stones, dashed round corners, struck consternation to scudding children in pinafores, all but annihilated more than one perambulator, and in less than ten minutes after leaving Mr. Burkham's door, ground against the curbstone before the little gate of Gray's Inn.

"God grant that George Sheldon may be at

home!" Valentine said to himself, as he hurried towards that gentleman's office. George Sheldon was at home. In this fight against time, Mr. Hawkehurst had so far found the odds in his favour.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the lawyer, looking up from his desk, as Valentine appeared on the threshold of the door, pale and breathless; "to what do I owe the unusual honour of a visit from Mr. Hawkehurst? I thought that rising *littérateur* had cut all old acquaintances, and gone in for the upper circles."

"I have come to you on a matter of life and death, George Sheldon," said Valentine; "this is no time to talk of why I haven't been to you before. When you and I last met, you advised me to beware of your brother Philip. It wasn't the first, or the second, or the third time that you so warned me. And now speak out like an honest man, and tell me what you meant by that warning? For God's sake, speak plainly this time."

"I cannot afford to speak more plainly than I have spoken half-a-dozen times already. I told

you to beware of my brother Phil, and I meant that warning in its fullest significance. If you had chosen to take my advice, you would have placed Charlotte Halliday's fortune, and Charlotte Halliday herself, beyond his power, by an immediate marriage. You didn't choose to do that, and there was an end of the matter. I have been a heavy loser by your pigheaded obstinacy; and I daresay before you and Phil Sheldon have done with each other, you too will find yourself a loser."

"God help me, yes!" cried Valentine with a groan; "I stand to make the heaviest loss that was ever made by man."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed George.

"Shall I tell you what you meant when you warned me against your own brother? Shall I tell you why you so warned me? You know that Philip Sheldon murdered Tom Halliday."

"Great God!"

"Yes; the secret is out. You knew it; how or when you discovered it, I cannot tell. You knew of that one hellish crime, and would have

prevented the commission of a second murder. You should have spoken more plainly. To know what you knew, and to confine yourself to cautious hints and vague suggestions as you did, was to have part in that devilish work. If Charlotte Halliday dies, her blood be upon your head—upon yours—as well as upon his!"

The young man had risen in his passion, and stood before George Sheldon with uplifted hands, and eyes that flashed angry lightnings. It seemed almost as if he would have called down the Divine vengeance upon this man's head.

"*If* Charlotte Halliday dies!" repeated George in a horror-stricken whisper; "why should you suggest such a thing?"

"Because she is dying."

There was a pause. Valentine flung himself passionately upon the chair from which he had just risen, with his back to George Sheldon, and his face bent over the back of the chair. The lawyer sat looking straight before him, with a ghastly countenance.

"I told him he meant *this*," he said to himself

in a hoarse whisper. "I told him in this office, not six months ago. Powers of hell, what a villain he is! And there are people who do not believe there is a devil!"

For a few moments Valentine gave free vent to his passion of grief. These tears of rage, of agony the most supreme, were the first he had shed since he had bent his face over Charlotte's soft brown hair, to hide the evidence of his sorrow. When he had dashed these bitter drops away from his burning eyes, he turned to confront George Sheldon, pale as death, but very calm. And after this he gave way no more to his passion. He was matched against Time, of all enemies most pitiless and unrelenting, and every minute wasted was a point scored by his foe.

"I want your help, George Sheldon," he said. "If you have ever been sorry that you made no effort to save Charlotte Halliday's father, prove yourself his friend by trying to save her."

"*If* I have been sorry!" echoed the lawyer. "Why, my miserable dreams have never been free from the horror of that man's face. You don't

know what it is—murder! Nobody knows, who hasn't been concerned in it. You read of murders in your newspapers. A shot B, or C poisoned D, and so on, all through the letters of the alphabet, with a fresh batch for every Sunday: but it never comes home to you. You think of the horror of it, in a shadowy kind of way, as you might think of having a snake twisted round your waist and legs, like that blessed man and boys one never sees the last of. But if you were to look at that plaster-cast all your life, you couldn't realise ten per cent of the horror you'd feel if the snake was *there*, alive, crushing your bones, and hissing in your ear. I have been face to face with murder, Valentine Hawkehurst; and if I were to live a century, I should never forget what I felt when I stood by Tom Halliday's death-bed, and it flashed upon me, all at once, that my brother Phil was poisoning him."

"And you did not try to save him — your friend?" cried Valentine.

"Why, you see," replied the other in a strange, slow way, "it was too late to save him;

I knew that, and—I held my tongue. What could I do? Against my own brother! That sort of thing in a family is ruin for everyone! Do you think anybody would have brought their business to me after my brother had stood in the Old Bailey dock to take his trial for murder? No; my only course was to keep my own counsel; and I kept it. Phil made eighteen thousand pounds by his marriage with poor Tom's widow; and a paltry hundred or two is all *I* ever touched of that money."

"And you *could* touch that money?" cried Valentine aghast.

"Money carries no infection. Did you ever ask any questions about the money you won at German gaming-tables? I daresay some of your Napoleons and ten-thaler notes could have told queer stories, if they had been able to talk. Taking Phil's money has never weighed upon my conscience. I'm not very inquisitive about the antecedents of a five-pound note: but I'll tell you what it is, Hawkehurst, I'd give all I have, and all I ever hope to have, and would go out and sweep a

crossing to-morrow, if I could get Tom Halliday's face out of my mind, with the look that he turned upon me the last time I saw him. 'Ah, George,' he said, 'in illness a man feels the comfort of being among friends!' And he took my hand and squeezed it, in his old hearty way. We had been boys together, Hawkehurst; birds-nesting in Hyley woods; on the same side in our Barlingford cricket-matches. And I shook his hand, and went away, and left him to die!"

And here Mr. Sheldon of Gray's Inn, the Sheldon who was in with the money-lenders, sharpest of legal prestigiators, most ruthless of opponents, most unscrupulous of allies, buried his face in a flaming bandanna, and fairly sobbed aloud. When the passion had passed, he got up and walked hastily to the window, more ashamed of this one touch of honest emotion than of all the falsehoods and chicaneries of his career.

"I didn't think I could have been such an ass," he muttered sheepishly.

"I did not hope that you could feel so deeply," answered Valentine. "And now help me to save

the only child of your ill-fated friend. I am sure that you can help me."

Without waiting to be questioned, Valentine related the circumstances of Charlotte's illness, and of his interview with Mr. Burkham.

"I did not even know that the poor girl was ill," said George Sheldon. "I have not seen Phil for months. He came here one day, and I gave him a bit of my mind. I told him, if he tried to harm her, I'd let the light in upon him and his doings. And I'll keep my word."

"But his motive? What, in the name of Heaven, can be his motive for taking her innocent life? He knows of the Haygarth estate, and must hope to profit by her fortune if she lives."

"Yes; and to secure the whole of that fortune if she dies. Her death would make her mother sole heir to that estate, and the mother is the merest tool in his hands. He may even have induced Charlotte to make a will in his favour, so that he himself may stand in her shoes."

"She would not have made a will without telling me of it."

"You don't know that. My brother Phil can do anything. It would be as easy for him to persuade her to maintain secrecy about the transaction as to persuade her to make the will. Do you suppose *he* shrinks from multiplying lies and forgeries and hypocrisies? Do you suppose anything in that small way comes amiss to the man who has once brought his mind to murder? Why, look at the Scotch play of that fellow Shakespeare's. At the beginning, your Macbeth is a respectable, trustworthy sort of person, anxious to get on in life, and so on, and that's all: but no sooner has he made an end of poor old Duncan, than he lays about him right and left—Banquo, Fleance, anybody and everybody that happens to be in his way. It was lucky for that Tartar of a wife of his that *she* hooked it, or he'd soon have put a stop to her sleep-walking. There's no such wide difference between a man and a tiger, after all. The tiger's a decent fellow enough till he has tasted human blood; but when once he *has*, Lord save the country-side from the jaws of the man-eater!"

"For Heaven's sake, let us waste no time in talk," Valentine cried impetuously. "I am to meet Burkham in Burlington-row directly I have got your advice."

"What for?"

"To see Dr. Jedd, and take him down to Hastings, if possible."

"That won't do."

"Why not?"

"Because Jedd's appearance would give Phil the office. Jedd gave evidence on the Fryar trial, and must be a marked man to him. All Jedd can tell you is that Charlotte is being poisoned. You know that already. Of course she'll want medical treatment, and so on, to bring her round; but she can't get that under my brother's roof. What you have to do is to get her away from that house."

"You do not know how ill she is. I doubt if she could bear the removal."

"Anything is better than to remain. *That* is certain death."

"But your brother would surely dispute her removal."

"He would, and oppose it inch by inch. We must get him away, before we attempt to remove her."

"How?"

"I will find the means for that. I know something of his business relations, and can invent some false cry for luring him off the trail. We *must* get him away. The poor girl was not in actual danger when you left her, was she?"

"No, thank God, there was no appearance of immediate danger. But she was very ill. And that man holds her life in his hand. He knows that I have come to London in search of a doctor. What if—"

"Keep yourself quiet, Hawkehurst. He will not hasten her death unless he is desperate; for a death occurring immediately after your first expression of alarm would seem sudden. He'll avoid any appearance of suddenness, if he can, depend upon it. The first thing is to get him away. But the question is, how to do it? There must be a bait. What bait? Don't talk to me, Hawkehurst. Let me think it out, if I can."

The lawyer leaned his elbows on the table, and abandoned himself to profound cogitation, with his forehead supported by his clenched hands. Valentine waited patiently while he thus cogitated.

"I must go down to Phil's office," he said at last, "and ferret out some of his secrets. Nothing but stock-exchange business, of an important character, would induce him to leave Charlotte Halliday. But if I can telegraph such a message as will bring him to town, I'll do it. Leave all that to me. And now, what about your work?"

"I am at a loss what to do, if I am not to take Dr. Jedd to Harold's-hill."

"Take him to St. Leonards; and if I get my brother out of the way, you can have Charlotte conveyed to an hotel in St. Leonards, where she can stop till she picks up strength enough to come to London."

"Do you think her mother will consent to her removal?"

"Do I think you will be such an idiot as to

ask for her consent?" cried George Sheldon impatiently. "My brother's wife is so weak a fool, that the chances are she'd insist on her daughter stopping quietly, to be poisoned. No; you must get Mrs. Sheldon out of the way somehow. Send her to look at the shops, or to bathe, or to pick up shells on the beach, or anything else equally inane. She's easy enough to deal with. There's that young woman, Paget's daughter, with them still, I suppose? Yes. Very well then, you and she can get Charlotte away between you."

"But for me to take those two girls to an hotel—the chance of scandal, of wonder, of inquiry? There ought to be some older person—some nurse. Stay, there's Nancy Woolper—the very woman! My darling has told me of that old woman's affectionate anxiety about her health—an anxiety which was singularly intense, it seemed to Lotta. Good God! do you think she, Nancy Woolper, could have suspected the cause of Mr. Halliday's death?"

"I daresay she did. She was in the house when he died, and nursed him all through his ill-

ness. She's a clever old woman. Yes, you might take her down with you; I think she would be of use in getting Charlotte away."

"I'll take her, if she will go."

"I am not sure of that; our north-country folks have stiffish notions about fidelity to old masters, and that kind of thing. Nancy Woolper nursed my brother Phil."

"If she knows or suspects the fate of Charlotte's father, she will try to save Charlotte," said Valentine with conviction. "And now, good-bye. I trust to you for getting your brother out of the way, George Sheldon; remember that."

He held out his hand; the lawyer took it with a muscular grip, which on this occasion meant something more than that base coin of jolly good-fellowship which so often passes current for friendship's virgin gold.

"You may trust me," George Sheldon said gravely. "Stop a moment, though; I have a proposition to make. If my brother Philip has induced that girl to make a will, as it is my belief he has, we must counter him. Come down with me

to Doctors' Commons. You've a cab? Yes; the business won't take half an hour."

"What business?"

"A special license for your marriage with Charlotte Halliday."

"A marriage?"

"Yes; her marriage invalidates her will, if she has made one, and does away with Phil's motive. Come along, we'll get the license."

"But the delay?"

"Exactly half-an-hour. Come!"

The lawyer dashed out of his office. "At home in an hour," he shouted to the clerk, and then ran downstairs, followed closely by Valentine, and did not cease running until he was in the King's-road, where the cab was waiting.

"Newgate-street and Warwick-lane, to Doctors' Commons!" he cried to the cabman; and Valentine was fain to take his seat in the cab without further remonstrance.

"I don't understand—" he began, as the cabman drove away.

"I do. It's all right; you'll put the license in

your pocket, and call at the church nearest where you hang out, Edgware-road way, give notice of the marriage, and so on; and as soon as Charlotte can bear the journey, bring her to London and marry her. I told you your course six months ago. Your obstinacy has caused the hazard of that young woman's life. Don't let us have a second edition of it."

"I will be governed by your advice," answered Valentine submissively; "it is the delay that tortures me."

The delay was indeed torture to him. Everything and everybody in Doctors' Commons seemed to him the very incarnation of slowness. The hansom cab might tear and grind the pavement, the hansom cabman might swear, until even monster wagons swerved aside to give him passage; but neither tearing nor swearing could move the incarnate stolidity of Doctors' Commons. When he left that quaint sanctuary of old usages, he carried with him the Archbishop of Canterbury's benign permission for his union with Charlotte Halliday. But he knew not whether it was only

a morsel of waste-paper which he carried in his pocket; and whether there might not ere long be need of a ghastlier certificate, giving leave and license for the rendering back of "ashes to ashes, and dust to dust."

Valentine's first call, after leaving George Sheldon at the gate of Doctors' Commons, was at the head-quarters of the Ragamuffins. His heart sank, as he ran into the bar of the hostelry to ask for the telegram which might be waiting for him.

Happily there was no telegram. To find no tidings of a change for the worse seemed to him almost equivalent to hearing of a change for the better. What had he not feared, after his interview with the surgeon of Bloomsbury!

From Covent Garden the hansom bowled swiftly to Burlington-row. Here Valentine found Mr. Burkham, pale and anxious, waiting in a little den of a third room on the ground-floor—a ghastly little room hung with anatomical plates,

and with some wax preparations in jars on the mantelpiece, by way of ornament. To them presently came Dr. Jedd, as lively and business-like as if Miss Halliday's case had been a question of taking out a double-tooth.

"Very sad!" he said; "these vegetable poisons—hands of unscrupulous man. Very interesting article in the *Medical Quarterly*—speculative analysis of the science of toxicology as known to the ancients."

"You will come down to Harold's-hill at once, sir?" said Valentine imploringly.

"Well, yes; your friend here, Mr. Burkham, has persuaded me to do so, though I need hardly tell you that such a journey will be to the last degree inconvenient."

"It is an affair of life and death!" faltered the young man.

"Of course, my dear sir. But then, you see, I have half-a-dozen other affairs of life and death on my hands at this moment. However, I have promised. My consultations will be over in half an hour; I have a round of visits after that; and

by—well, say by the five-o'clock express, I will go to St. Leonards."

"The delay will be very long," said Valentine.

"It cannot be done sooner. I ought to go down to Hertfordshire this evening—most interesting case—carbuncle—three operations in three consecutive weeks—Swain as operator. At five o'clock I shall be at the London-bridge station. Until then, gentlemen, good-day.—Lawson, the door."

Dr. Jedd left his visitors to follow the respectable white-cravatted butler, and darted back to his consulting-room.

Mr. Burkham and Valentine walked slowly up and down Burlington-row, before the latter returned to his cab.

"I thank you heartily for your help," said Valentine to the surgeon; "and I believe, with God's grace, we shall save this dear girl's life. It was the hand of Providence that guided me to you this morning. I can but believe the same hand will guide me to the end."

On this they parted. Valentine told his cabman to drive to the Edgware-road; and in one of the churches in the immediate neighbourhood of that thoroughfare he gave notice of his intention to enter the bonds of holy matrimony. He had some difficulty in arranging matters with the clerk, whom he saw in his private abode and non-official guise. That functionary was scarcely able to grasp the idea of an intending Benedick who could not state positively when he wanted to be married. Happily, however, the administration of half-a-sovereign considerably brightened the clerk's perceptions.

"I see what you want," he said. "Young lady a invalid, which she wants to leave her home as she finds uncomfortable, she being over twenty-one years of age and her own mistress. It's what you may call a runaway match, although the parties ain't beholden to anyone, in a manner of speaking. *I* understand. You give me half an hour's notice any morning within the legal hours, and I'll have one of our young curates ready for you as soon as you're ready for them;

and have you and the young lady tied up tight enough before you know where you are. We ain't very long over *our* marriages, unless it is something out of the common way."

The clerk's familiarity was more good-natured than flattering to the applicant's self-esteem; but Valentine was in no mood to object to this easy-going treatment of the affair. He promised to give the clerk the required notice; and having arranged everything in strictly legal manner, hurried back to his cab, and directed the man to drive to the Lawn.

It was now three o'clock. At five he was to meet Dr. Jedd at the station. He had two hours for his interview with Nancy Woolper, and his drive from Bayswater to London Bridge.

He had tasted nothing since daybreak; but the necessity to eat and drink never occurred to him. He was dimly conscious of feeling sick and faint, but the reason of this sickness and faintness did not enter into his thoughts. He took off his hat, and leant his head back against the cushion of the hansom as that vehicle rattled across the

squares of Paddington. The summer day, the waving of green trees in those suburban squares; the busy life and motion of the world through which he went, mixed themselves into one jarring whirl of light and colour, noise and motion. He found himself wondering how long it was since he had left Harold's-hill. Between the summer morning in which he had walked along the dusty high-road, with fields of ripening corn upon his left, and all the broad blue sea upon his right, and the summer afternoon in which he drove in a jingling cab through the noisy streets and squares of Bayswater, there seemed to him a gulf so wide, that his tired brain shrank from scanning it.

He struggled with this feeling of helplessness and bewilderment, and overcame it.

"Let me remember what I have to do," he said to himself; "and let me keep my wits about me till that is done."

CHAPTER II.

PHŒNICIANS ARE RISING.

While Mr. Hawkehurst arranged his affairs with the clerk of St. Matthias-in-the-fields, in the parish of Marylebone, George Sheldon sat in his brother's office writing a letter to that distinguished stockbroker. The pretext of writing a letter was the simplest pretext for being alone in his brother's room; and to be alone in Philip Sheldon's room was the first step in the business which George had to do.

The room was distractingly neat, and as handsomely furnished as it is possible for an office to be within the closest official limits. A Spanish-mahogany desk with a cylinder cover, and innumerable drawers fitted with invisible Bramah locks, occupied the centre of the room; and four ponderous Spanish-mahogany chairs, with padded

backs, and seats covered with crimson morocco, were primly ranged against the wall. Upon the mantelpiece ticked a skeleton-clock; above which there hung the sternest and grimmest of almanacks, on either side whereof were fastened divers lists and calendars of awful character, affected by gentlemen on Change.

Before penetrating to this innermost and sacred chamber, George Sheldon wasted some little time in agreeable gossip with a gentleman whom he found yawning over the *Times* newspaper in an outer and less richly-furnished apartment. This gentleman was Philip Sheldon's clerk, the younger son of a rich Yorkshire farmer, who had come to London with the intention of making his fortune on the Stock Exchange, and whose father had paid a considerable sum in order to obtain for this young man the privilege of reading the *Times* in Mr. Sheldon's office, and picking up whatever knowledge might be obtained from the business transactions of his employer.

The career of Philip Sheldon had been watched with some interest by his fellow towns-

men of Barlingford. They had seen him leave that town with a few hundreds in his pocket, and they had heard of him twelve years afterwards as a prosperous stockbroker, with a handsome house and a handsome carriage, and the reputation of being one of the sharpest men in the City. The accounts of him that came to Barlingford were all more or less exaggerated; and the men who discussed his cleverness and his good luck were apt to forget that he owed the beginning of his fortunes to Tom Halliday's eighteen thousand pounds. The one fact that impressed Philip Sheldon's townsmen was the fact that a Barlingford man had made money on the Stock Exchange; and the one inference they drew therefrom was the inference that other Barlingford men might do the same.

Thus it had happened that Mr. Stephen Orcott, of Plymley Rise farm, near Barlingford, being at a loss what to do with a somewhat refractory younger son, resolved upon planting his footsteps in the path so victoriously trodden by Philip Sheldon. He wrote to Philip, asking him to

receive the young man as clerk, assistant, secretary—anything, with a view to an ultimate junior partnership; and Philip consented, upon certain conditions. The sum he demanded was rather a stiff one, as it seemed to Stephen Orcott, but he opined that such a sum would not have been asked if the advantages had not been proportionally large. The bargain was therefore concluded, and Mr. Frederick Orcott came to London. He was a young man of horsey propensities, gifted with a sublime contempt for any kind of business requiring application or industry, and with a supreme belief in his own merits.

George Sheldon had known Frederick Orcott as a boy, and had been in his society some half-dozen times since his coming to London. He apprehended no difficulty in obtaining from this young gentleman any information he had the power to afford.

"How do, Orcott?" he said with agreeable familiarity. "My brother Phil not come back yet?"

"No," replied the other sulkily. "There have

been ever so many people here bothering me about him. Where has he gone? and when will he be back? and so on. I might as well be some d—d footman, if I'm to sit here answering questions all day. High Wickham races are on to-day, and I wanted to see Barmaid run before I put my money on her for Goodwood. She was bred down our way, you see, and I know she's like enough to win the cup, if she's fit. They don't know much about her this way, either, though she's own sister to Boots, that won the Chester Cup last year, owing to Topham's being swindled into letting him off with seven lbs. He ran at the York Spring, you see, for a twopenny-halfpenny plate, and the boy that rode him pulled his head half off—I saw him do it—and then he won the Chester, and brought his owners a pot of money."

This information was not exactly what George Sheldon wanted; but he planted himself on the hearthrug in an easy attitude, with his back against the mantelpiece, and appeared much interested in Mr. Orcott's discourse.

"Anything stirring in the City?" he asked presently.

"Stirring? No—nothing stirring but stagnation, as some fellow said in a play I saw the other night. Barlingford folks say your brother Philip has made a heap of money on the Stock Exchange; but if he has, he must have done a good deal more business before I came to him than he has done lately. I can't see how a man is to develope into a Rothschild out of an occasional two-and-sixpence per cent on the transfer of some old woman's savings from railway stock to consols; and that's about the only kind of business I've seen much of lately. Of course Phil Sheldon has got irons of his own in the fire; for he's an uncommonly deep card, you see, that brother of yours, and it isn't to be expected he'll tell *me* all he's up to. I know he's up to his eyebrows in companies; but I don't see how he is to make his fortune out of *them*, for limited liability nowadays seems only another name for unlimited crash. However, I don't care. It pleased my governor to get me into

Sheldon's office, and it suited my book to come to London; but if the author of my being thinks I'm going to addle my blessed brains with the decline and fall of the money-market, he's a greater fool than I took him for—and that's saying a great deal."

And here Mr. Frederick Orcott lapsed into admiring contemplation of his boots, which were the *chefs-d'œuvre* of a sporting bootmaker: boots that were of the ring, ringy, and of the corner, cornery.

"Ah," said George, "and Phil doesn't tell you much of his affairs, doesn't he? That's rather a bad sign, I should think. Looks as if he was rather down upon his luck, eh?"

"Well, there's no knowing, you see, with that sort of close fish. He may have made his book for a great haul, and may be keeping himself quiet till the event comes off. He may be laying on to something with all his might, you know, on safe information. But there's one thing I know he stands to lose by."

"What's that?"

"The Phœnician Loan. He speculated in the bonds when they began to go down; and I'm blessed if they haven't been dropping ever since, an eighth a day, as regular as the day comes round. He bought them for the March account, and has been paying contango since then, and holding on in hopes of a rise. I don't know whether the purchase was a large one; but I know he's been uncommonly savage about the drop. He bought on the strength of private information from the other side of the Channel. The Emperor was putting his own money into the Phœnician business, and it was the best game out, and so on. But he seems to have been made a fool of, for once in a way."

"The bonds may steady themselves."

"Yes, they *may;* but, on the other hand, they mayn't. There are the Stock-Exchange lists, with Phœnicians ticked off by your brother's own pen. A steady drop, you see. 'Let me have a telegram, if there's a sudden rise,' said Sheldon to me, the day he left London; 'they'll go up with a rush, when they do move.' But they've been moving

the other way ever since; and I think if he stayed away till doomsday, it would be pretty much the same."

"*Phœnicians are rising rapidly. Come back to town.*"

These were the words of the telegraphic despatch which shaped itself in George Sheldon's brain, as his brother's clerk revealed the secrets of his employer.

It was found—the solution of the one great question as to how Philip Sheldon was to be lured away from the bedside of his unconscious victim. Here was the bait.

"I knew I could do it; I knew I could get all I wanted to know out of this shallow-brained idiot," he said to himself triumphantly.

And then he told the shallow-brained idiot that he thought he would write a line to his brother; and on that pretence went into Philip's office.

Here, use his eyes as he might, he could discover nothing; he could glean no stray scrap of information. The secrets that could be guarded by concealed Bramah locks and iron safes, with

mystic words to be learned by the man who would open them, Philip Sheldon knew how to protect. Unhappily for himself, he had been compelled to confide some of his secrets to human receptacles not to be guarded by Bramah locks or mystic words.

The lawyer did not waste much time in his brother's office. A very hasty investigation showed him there was nothing to be learned from those bare walls and that inviolable cylinder-topped desk. He scribbled a few lines of commonplace at a table by the window; sealed and addressed his note; and then departed to despatch his telegram. "Phœnicians are rising rapidly," he wrote, and that was all. He signed the despatch Frederick Orcott.

"Phil and Orcott may settle the business between them," he said to himself, as he forged the Yorkshireman's name. "What I have to do is to get Phil away, and give Hawkehurst a chance of saving Tom Halliday's daughter; and I sha'n't stand upon trifles in the doing of it."

After having despatched this telegram, George

Sheldon found himself much too restless and excited for ordinary business. He, so renowned even amongst cool hands for exceptional coolness, was on this occasion thoroughly unnerved. He dropped into a city tavern, and refreshed himself with a dram. But, amidst all the bustle and clatter of a crowded bar, the face of Tom Halliday, haggard and worn with illness, was before his eyes, and the sound of Tom Halliday's voice was in his ears. "I can't settle to anything this afternoon," he said to himself. "I'll run down to Bayswater, and see whether Hawkehurst has managed matters with Nancy Woolper."

END OF VOL. II.

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